

# In the Shadow of my Country

**Mbuh Tenu Mbuh**



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In the Shadow of my Country

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## DISCLAIMER

*The names, characters, places and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Accordingly, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely one of incredible coincidence.*

## **Contents**

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### **Chapter One**

Ndamnyeh, Once Upon a Time ..... 1

### **Chapter Two**

The Shoot from Aghem ..... 31

### **Chapter Three**

Where the Light Shone ..... 45

### **Chapter Four**

Ache Head Sons of Mulafako ..... 99

### **Chapter Five**

Bitter Seeds of Faith ..... 119

### **Chapter Six**

The Strike ..... 129

### **Chapter Seven**

Farewell, Matajem ..... 159

### **Chapter Eight**

Vanity Fair ..... 171

### **Chapter Nine**

Zakia's Transmutation ..... 179

### **Chapter Ten**

City of Seven Hills ..... 189

### **Chapter Eleven**

Saints and Ghosts of a Palmed Grove ..... 197

### **Chapter Twelve**

Feuding Pedagogues ..... 205

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Eclipse Beyond the Grove ..... 213

**Chapter Fourteen**

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Tiny Beads of Inspiration ..... | 225 |
|---------------------------------|-----|

**Chapter Fifteen**

|                                    |     |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Acolytes and Misinterpreters ..... | 247 |
|------------------------------------|-----|

**Chapter Sixteen**

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Voices of the Inquisition ..... | 271 |
|---------------------------------|-----|

**Chapter Seventeen**

|                           |     |
|---------------------------|-----|
| The Bait and a Noose..... | 289 |
|---------------------------|-----|

**Chapter Eighteen**

|                                    |     |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| To Migrate or not to Migrate ..... | 305 |
|------------------------------------|-----|



*In the Shadow of my Country*

**For Ngwi and the Kids  
&  
To the Loving Memory of  
The Master, KWM.**



## Chapter One

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### Ndamnyeh, Once Upon a Time

The Ndamnyeh stood before him like an erect God, huge in despondent silence. Jutting peak of dread in the greying day, squatting on stout limbs of which sensuous tongues for folk lineages had recalled at sleep-time, and was he to be audience and custodian? Passageways of the umbilical cord, his recent trough, ferried from Aghem, thunderland of Nkoh mysteries, in the twilight of time and across the rolling hills and furious rivers in mammy wagon, to the base of the Ndamnyeh, stringed distances and he at both ends, peeping. Who was there to tell him, apart from his mother, how nostalgia was planted in every heart as the plague and yeast of memory and that every journey goes both ways? Grey turfs atop the Ndamnyeh like wild hair, fringing the sky from where one can touch heaven without even jumping, and that God will open the door when you knock. His sister had asked their mother, after squinting into the distance, whether they could see the garden from there and she said yes, but that they had to grow up first.

He, fourth child in a family that was still to understand the modern talk of family planning, was awed by the towering giant glowing golden in the sunset light, and closed his eyes for a moment to absorb ancestral mysteries, at the end and outset of a journey. His mother led his five green years by the hand, little tendrils that offered hope, she prayed, although he did not know this, at the twilight of his epic, away from the place and people he knew faraway, to those he had heard about and fancied without especial commitment. The narrow, overgrown paths with little things darting all over alarmed his folktale glories of nostalgic narratives that bore the burdens of time on the tip of the tongue. She urged him on, but his reluctant steps crawled to a stop on the crest of the homestead slope, poor trembling shoots, she thought, and wondered again why this mad decision of Alioum's? Was it just to encounter their

ancestors with palm oil kegs and raffia jugs of commiseration? The whistling wind that caught her thoughts with a lulling sigh also roused the partridge to quack the hour and she shook off the heavy thoughts and gathered her tendrils once more into her free hand; and as the sun descended toward the distant hills and greyness fell all around them, he heard the first shrill sounds of welcome shredding his cobwebs, as his mother stooped to be relieved of her portmanteau and of the baby girl strapped to her back, and they stepped over the door ledge.

Nightmares of welcome for him, traveller and visitor, smelling the sweat and labour of fatigued looks of wonder, and the smoke dug holes into his eyes, sharp and peppery; he wanted to scream and run out but his mother's brother and fellow traveller, Achuh, was waiting to laugh at him so he only rubbed his eyes. And the queuing voices, surprised and hilarious in welcome, saw him as meeting point of the dead and the living, and said:

'How big our father and husband, only yesterday dead and now a man already, *che!*'

Life was a miraculous cycle, they said, and clapped in wonder; like the Ndamnyeh only a trickle when the sun burned every hill brown but a gush of plenty and breeding their tadpoles when the rains came and transformed everywhere into a veil of green. And he peered into the obscured corners that spewed brown smoke into his eyes, then flowing streams as he pressed his itching eyelids. His eyes were blurred by the smoke but he could feel them sampling him up and filling him from the gourd of lore, camwood first so he should have peace in sleep after the endless trek, and then *nstop* for his heartstrings against lurking evil, and his mother called out their names so he should never forget.

\*\*\*\*

By the time Tipoung he got up next morning, his sides aching and his eyes refusing to open, there were more people in the house to feel his arms and limbs, commenting as they saw fit, about this or that regarding his fate. He heard the voices first and then their tongues tickled his mind and he felt their words like his mother's needle without the pain threading his life to theirs, claiming and acknowledging kinship.

He saw the bamboo walls more clearly then, erected to shield the bamboo beds and their straw mattresses from common view; the lower ceiling extending only to the middle of the room, beyond which was the *ategh-mbvouh* and its small trap where firewood was stored during the rainy season and Meuh kept her money in cigar tins; but he was never to touch it, his mother warned, because there was a big snake wrapped around the tin, and also because his father kept his important 'books' there. The *miliaré* running along the extreme wall from the door contained hoes and baskets and bundles and farm junk. Finally the sooth-covered *apah* of plaited bamboo skin, below which, hanging by a knotty cord was a blackened basket containing the handiest things like matches and spices. His mother called out the names and pointed and he mumbled them after her. And the boy looked on fascinated, and was given sun-baked sweet potato biscuits that were too tough for his weak molars and he mangled them until the saliva rendered them chewable. His father's brothers and their wives came and carried him on their knees or smacked his buttocks playfully, and pointed out their homesteads and said at night the God of Ndamnyeh visits them with honey and was he ready to taste of it? He cocked his head undecided and they laughed and he felt an echo and knew they were his people. But the little children, who crowded the *apoung'he* and had been encouraged by Achuh, looked at him with dark eyes and he looked back suspiciously. His mother urged him to offer them slices of bread she placed in a plate that was decorated with roses but broken at the rim, and he stretched out his hand tentatively. As the sun rose and the undulating landscape echoed with sounds of the fauna, he ventured into their midst and listened for clues of what he did not know. Then he accompanied them to the stream and saw the tadpoles disappear into the muddy banks. They filled their calabashes and buckets and one of the children caught a *ngoup-aloum* as it danced on the water and placed it on their foreheads. Tipoung'he felt the dull sting and a shock ran through him and the others laughed, seeing his eyes pop open.

The night sounds were a colossal buzz of varying pitches, and the most familiar, after a while, was the cricket chirp behind the house from where the farms stretched into the valley and over the undulating hills with only patches of grass. The boys went out with a blinking lamp and a flat-head cutlass to trap the celebrant insect

that invited its own death foolishly, his mother said, and eventually returned with a sackful. Meuh pinched off the wings and threw them into the palm oil on the fire and they sizzled with a pleasant smell. Tipoung'he was always served generously and he ate and sucked his fingers noisily. His mother, looking at him with a frown that he alone saw, thought he was going to suck off his fingernails and said in Pidgin that it was bad habit to still stare at people as their hands went up and down, to and from their mouths, and the insects disappeared in the act.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ndamnyeh was a hollowed settlement on the fringes of Nyenmechop. The people called it the navel of the land and Tipoung'he felt like a seed dropped in its clayey ridges. Barricaded by the Bamboutous ranges, it heaved to the rhythm aboriginal wildness left behind by the rush of development and unwilling to catch up. The men were proud to be the protectors of Nyenmechop from the warriors of Tipah. Drilled teams of chest-heaving sentries who carried out regular surveillance along the stretched valley until they emerged from the woods and stood on the tip of Mafor-Pinyenmechop from where they hollered challenging invectives at Tipah, boasted in song that Tipah groaned under Nyenmechop like the testis beneath an elephant, and then contemplated sweeping down on the vandals and settling the rivalry between the two clans once for all. But Ndipindoh, mouthpiece of Tsaapifor to the clan, was against any rash action that was not sanctioned by the palace, and what would any violator do when *Kwi'for* planted the royal injunction in their compound?

The undulating slopes with thatched roofs dotting the distance, but never too far for the manly holler, *iyenb*, whether to honour a rendezvous or alert the rest of the community of an emergency, if it was minor enough not to deserve the wooden gong or Ndipindoh's swift passage through the clan under cover of night; and the female counterpart, *ou-wou*, in greeting, to know if the day was clean, and to know if the farming date was still maintained. If only Nyenmechop had remained the nucleus clan of Tenghehfeng's dream who had trekked for ten rains across hills and through forests, to peg a shrine for the days to come, Ndipindoh lamented, his aboriginal

scars would have healed already. They had lived happily, laughing and crying with one another, and having their problems that could never remain unresolved until Nwuoupang came with his own bundles of confusion and turned the people against each other, when all they wanted to do was resolve their problems as they had always done. But a few of them had run to Nwuoupang who then put on his white helmet and rushed to Nyenmechop and bred fear into every heart. Then the people scattered like wild birds over the hills and disappeared into new homes that were becoming their *ifums* by the time of Tipoung'he's arrival there. Yet, the land had been vast and inviting, every family its own hill, and soon patches of coffee farms sprouted on every horizon, scattered hamlets from which the coils of smoke announced the number of evening pots cooking and the people soon forgot about the recent disturbances.

This was the Ndamnyeh that the frightened child did not know beyond fantastic stories from the traders who came and stayed in their home with endless stories. They crushed 'biscuit' bones of the pepper-soup with their tobacco-stained teeth, talking, and their eyes rolled with contentment as the fats trickled down the corners of their mouths that opened and closed like traps.

So the partridge and the ostrich called the hour in turns, near the homestead, and from the distant womb of the forest, and the villagers either woke to the new day or gathered their farm things to return home to the warmth of the evening fire. They roasted their cocoyams and gulped raffia before retiring to the comfort of their bamboo beds with the prickly mattresses.

Tipoung'he had heard of such routine and along the way from Aghem had imagined old women with long baskets on their backs, strapped onto their heads and walking with a stoop, and wondered how it would feel to experience it.

'Do they have shoes on mother?'

'Yes.'

'And do they sleep on their farms and do they hoe the ridges under the moonlight, mother?'

He was fighting with the Nyenmechop language and his mother soon became bored with providing answers that were followed almost immediately by new questions. She finally brought her hand gently over his mouth and turned to the people with whom they were travelling. Shunned, Tipoung'he watched the trees rush at them

from a distance and then swished by. Then he remembered when his mother asked him to keep quiet when big people were talking. She had said his sisters must always keep drinking water in the house so that God should never beg for water and not find even a drop to drink. So he had asked why God should come to beg knowing that there was no water at home, and his mother had said 'be quiet' and sent him out to play with the other children.

His eyes watered as he watched the running trees waving at them toward the opposite direction and he stood on his toes and called Achuh to see, until he almost thought they were never going to arrive as the people and trees dangled by swiftly in the opposite direction and they stood on the same spot, with the eternal drone of the lorry. He looked out still, ahead, and noticed the trees in a mad rush toward them, and before he realised what was happening, they flew by with a wave. Then he saw the men and women and children returning from the distant farms, long baskets hanging from the backs of the women and strapped to their heads with thick, padded cords. They too were rushing, suddenly, as if attracted toward the lorry, but then swished off rapidly.

He turned toward his mother, pointing: 'Look! They are running to meet us. And the trees too.'

His mother smiled, and cuddled his head in spite of herself, and also not to break the flow of their conversation.

No sooner did the people reach the lorry than they sped off again, even faster, in the opposite direction, disappearing, and he felt their vanishing regrets, without bye-bye. But they, in the lorry, were not moving, only the people and the trees outside were hastening toward them, only to disappear in the rising dust behind where it had not rained for some days in the dying season. Where the road was bad and the motorboy and some of the men pulled at the thick ropes and poured baskets of sand into the mud, the women and children trekked and stood in the shade of a tree while the lorry groaned and trembled, but refused to bulge. At another point they stepped out for the driver to negotiate another dangerous spot, always shouting 'ba'luck boy' to the motorboy whose bare hands, if unassisted by sympathetic passengers, must haul the steel dread out of the bog, and he looked frightened whenever the driver said 'ba'luck boy' or 'ba'luck pickin' and added, 'wetin be your use for this lorry, eh?' Tipoung'he pitied him and paused to see, but his



mother always dragged him away quickly. Tipoung'he was carried shoulder-high by Angwashi the tobacco dealer with the shinny spot on his head. The hills dangled around them as he walked and turned round to agree or disagree with what someone said. Tipoung'he itched to touch his bald spot, but fear of Angwashi's brazen voice restrained his hand. The winding roads cut through clustered villages with hazy looks, awakened by the drone of the mammy wagon in which they travelled all night and then the next day. Plank linings and benches screwed to the steel served as stiff-back seats, and in the cold morning, the vapour rose from the banks of little streams or spurted from their mouths when they talked or breathed into their palms for warmth. The smell of gasoline from the exhausted engine stuck in Tipoung'he's nostrils and he sneezed.

They reached Bamenda by midday, the crazy spot from where their father always returned with biscuits and *bolobolo* that looked like huge colourful snakes when inflated with a reed and then sneezed unend, deflating. Even to Tipoung'he's fledgling imagination, Bamenda announced a fairyland terminal where heroes disembarked and proclaimed their prizes. He seemed to be his mother's prize as she held him by the hand down the plank ladder that was connected to the lorry and they disembarked and sat on long benches for breakfast. The flavour of his tea, which Angwashi bought, was like the songs of Eden. Angwashi laughed hoarsely when he said goodbye, continuing to the Guzang market, and nudged Tipoung'he's head with his puckered nose that looked like the black foot stone with little holes that smoothened the cracks in his mother's heel, and although the boy loved to feel the tip with his fingers, he only heard the guttural voice from a distance. His mouth watered at the sight of the creamy softness of the peak milk, as Achuh read out the name and showed him the peaks on the empty tin. Then he dipped his thick Calabar bread and guided the sodden lump gingerly into his mouth, never again to taste anything that peaceful.

'Is that how the people felt when Jesus fed them, mother?'

'Yes, but finish and let us go.'

He was disappointed; why the rush when they just arrived? He wanted to ask his mother more, because she always had answers for every question, if that was also what the Sunday school song

meant about Canaan, the land of milk and honey? He had asked his mother where Canaan was and she said something about *Ba'israel* but would not say how far it was from Aghem. Pinching his bread into the tea and then into his mouth, Tipoung'he wanted to say he knew where Canaan was but was afraid his mother would call him a bad child and Achuh would laugh at him. Achuh was more interested in the lorries which filled every space in the park and had finished his tea and was wandering round them as if with a secret knowledge of how they were made. On their way from Aghem, he kept on mumbling the scrawled letters along the length of the lorry, first to himself and then more confidently to the hearing of the others hustled together on the wooden benches that lined the womb of the lorry, showing off shyly.

'Blue Moon,' he said, and his eyes popped out with the pride of knowing.

But Tipoung'he challenged him even with his Sunday school knowledge. 'Is the moon blue?'

'Yes, can't you see?' the other countered, pointing out the twisted scrawls and the orange-slices of the moon in-between, to Tipoung'he. It was red and Tipoung'he wanted to ask why they called it blue. He remembered the moon and the woman whose baby was strapped to her back, always splitting firewood because she had done a bad thing. That was a red moon that should be called red, not blue, and he wondered why.

'You also have blue moons,' Achuh who could be mistaken for Tipoung'he's big brother said, and their mother said yes too and his inquiring eyes fell.

Soon they stopped and stepped out for gallons of water to be poured into the ever-thirsty and gurgling engine, and Tipoung'he scanned the pitch dark sky for a sign of the moon, and if during the day he knew the sun was the brother of the moon, sharing their work as his mother had said Tipoung'he and his brother should.

They finished their breakfast and the men who were to continue with them to the village made arrangements for the connection in smaller lorries and they were squeezed together. At Foghang his mother bought a gallon of kerosene and bananas because they were trek the rest of the way. The male companions, neighbour, friend, and stranger, lifted Tipoung'he up and adjusted him on their shoulder

blades, and he gripped their heads for balance. His shoe heels bounced off their chests in alternative rhythms, *ghrng-ghrng* because the carrier's chest bones, exposed, sounded like the empty drums in which they used to roll when there was no rain to fill them up; or the other's *ploo-plooh*, bouncing off the fleshy muscles, and the world danced in see-saw jerks as they walked and stumbled, up and down the rugged terrain. Aghem was history already, shadows to which he was to cling, and called up different faces from the past to rescue him.

\*\*\*\*

Long rainy days offered dripping consolations through the coffee leaves and thatched roof, a hypnotic *cha-cha*, dripping into his heart; and the dark nights of silent despair that followed in succession, accumulated into weeks and months and season after season, with their alternating spells of thunderous rains and the scorching sun, his mother leaving to come back, tears of departure and laughs of return, fitting herself between planting and harvest, and immersion into primary school with its many mysteries to know, finally steadied Tipoung'he. But he was scared too, and withdrew from people who hushed him into his own thoughts. He could not talk as he used to do with his brother and sisters, and clung to his own thoughts for comfort, always suspicious of the other voices invading his world.

They had left the *ifum* too, and settled in his father's new three bedroom house. Although Tipoung'he asked his father and he said yes, this was their village house, the boy was unaware of the politics of movement and resettlement following the government's new design of Regroupment of scattered hamlets and the pressure from the officials in Bamenda for the people to leave the bushes and form townships. The track that snaked across the ridges of Kongmben offered good prospects, the Lands and Surveys man said, and if the people cooperated they would never regret. One way for them to cooperate, he went on, was to educate more of their kids who shall then ensure the future of their new settlement. A deadly battle followed between men and women over farm labour, and between the villagers hoping to peg their future township and the *bororos* resisting the encroachment into *their* grazing area. Then

someone said no *bororo* official had ever visited them, proof that if they continued to educate their children while those of the nomads clung to cow tails, the land could remain theirs when their children occupy all the big offices in Bamenda. The following Ntare, Penn led Tipoung'he and Taanah and Anderiya to the Headmaster's office who seemed to see only Tipoung'he and wondered if Penn thought they also had a nursery. But Tipoung'he only looked around anxiously, ready to say 'Yes Sir' to anyone who talked to him for fear they would be angry and send him back. That was what Achuh had said to him before going back to Aghem the last time. His father and Meuh were against the idea of him going to school just yet because he was too small and the big boys would bully him. But Penn said the Headmaster would decide, and Tipoung'he prayed now that he would say yes. And so to fool his uncle and the Headmaster, Tipoung'he curved his right arm round his head to catch the left ear with a confident glint in his eyes. The elders looked at each other and smiled and agreed they should allow him try his luck especially because he desired it so much and his father was mostly in Aghem and Penn who looked up from the list the Headmaster had given them, and which was being interpreted to him, agreed that man no di know, and added that the boy will be too lonely at home when the others went to school or to the farm.

Gradual farewell then to the ancestral tongue and no more vernacular, whether in class or during *small-small-thing-pick'am-trowey*, Pleasir said, although Tipoung'he, the town boy, had little need for the caution. And farewell too, to the *Twang? Džab!* of riddles or the longer *Kwaleh? Lebkwat!* bedtime stories that were replaced by a singsong opening.

'Arabian nights?'

'Entertainment!'

'Boys and girls are you happy to hear my story?'

And the deafening chorus, 'Yes, we are happy to hear your story and what is your story about?' Then bursts of synchronised clapping that hailed the storyteller to commence.

Yet, there was joy and peace in that distant nursery of kempt beatitudes along the flower beds, paradise from the pupils' fingertips softening the earth, rooting out the weeds and steadying the flowers in their stones-paved beds: Jacob's ladder, lantana, marigolds, African red lilies, and many others which were protected by Christ's

thorns that pricked the careless hand. The wind vane was always pointing North with its nodding cock always flicking its tail, and the senior classes five, six, and seven gathered round it in turns and their teachers talked and Tipoung'he watched them from the shade of the lone stone building, wishing he were there to hear what was said. And the teacher opened the rain gauge whose silver flask was suspended on two short poles besides the vane, and talked more. Tipoung'he was to remember long after that those were the heydays of that Presbyterian enclosure, when God's work was not yet an excuse to do man's bidding on a crucifix of misery, while the Synod and its round table sang halleluiahs for their condition; and where his teacher with a gab in his teeth, a dimple and a big smile that refused to fade away again led him to the front tables in the Infants. Low broad squares of squatting plank around which the pupils gathered like chicks on a windy morning and recited the exemplary motto of the heart after the three-tap prompting by the headboy who shared his table with Anderiya.

'The heart of education is the education of the heart.'

The 'Good morning, Sir' that trembled from their lips affected the teacher and threw him into confused emotions as brother-pedagogue, not knowing which line to toe. Then followed the morning prayer, because they were too young to attend regular Devotions, and their tiny voices squeaked in piety, huddled around their tables like the lambs of God.

*Day by day, dear Lord,  
Of Thee three things I pray:  
To see Thee more clearly,  
Love Thee more dearly,  
Follow Thee more clearly,  
Day by day, dear Lord, Amen!*

Refreshed after the spiritual bath, and warmed by singing and clapping and dancing, the teacher directed their chaotic recitals from Nature Study to Hygiene, and pointed to the broad charts with colour pictures of leaves, trees, and fruits; or buckets with covers, cups, plates, and bowls, a bed and a tooth brush, which was replaced by a chewing stick for practical purposes. Then he chalked pictures on their free arm-boards, from one pupil to the next, correcting what

they had done, and watched the pupils day by day graduate to the Writing, Sums, and Language Activity exercise books, one after the other. The thin red and blue or broad blue lines as horizontal pillars to the trembling fingers learning to print the ABC of their destiny looked like the tracks of Nana's Land Rover to Tipoung'he, first to be initiated in the mystery of the pencil; and the squares in the exercise book for Sums, placing a figure in its box, was like playing *tak'am*, skipping to plant their feet in two squares, starting tentatively with the plus and takeaway. After which, eventually, they were all trimmed and sliced in conjunction with how they mastered J. C. Gagg and then the end of term or year farewells to their dear teachers. Often, during the rainy season, a light drizzle slashed against the broken window panes and the pupils herded around one another for warmth and to escape the splash. They were filled with the joy of expectations that usually came on Friday, and for Tipoung'he, the knowledge that there was to be no school and therefore no trekking along the seven mile track and no portion-cleaning too. They were ready to sing their hearts out, in thankful anticipation.

*We come to school on Monday,  
Tuesday and Wednesday,  
Thursday and Friday  
It's time for us to go!*

Their thin voices trembled again, always with unknown emotion and the teachers, watching and directing, pretended to be caught up in the euphoria, but then their hearts were heavy too, especially when the little voices chirped the chorus that was like fate.

*Goodbye our dear teachers,  
Goodbye our dear teachers,  
Goodbye our dear teachers  
It's time for us to go!*

On the recurrent heels of such farewells, the days rolled into weeks and months and in the end their report cards filtered those who carried their water in baskets and shame to you, the Headmaster said, from those who carried theirs in steel buckets, congratulations! How devastating to await verdict of the 'trials' by those who were

to advance on probation, and then the 'repeaters' who were to dance again on the same spot and try to get buckets or mend the holes in their buckets! The Headmaster praised and cursed, and the teachers did the same, while the pupils smiled or wept. From one class to the next the horizon broadened, emphasis shifted and as the years rolled by in magical cycles the pupils were introduced into the mystery of Thor and his tempting marrow, of people on the move, and of King Midas and his ass's ears. They read too of different countries and their ways, and the pupils gasped to learn that other places could be more beautiful than Bamenda of which many of them had only heard. Then they awaited Christmas with a hunger that was almost pathetic, for it was always the most enchanting landmark on the calendar that made everything young again, as the pigs squealed under the piercing knife, three ribs below the armpit so that the fatal blow hit the heart-cord, and soon the smell of burning fats filled the air, and the children knew that the world would never end. They went to church on Christmas Eve dragging their feet, reluctant to leave their new wear and pork at home. And Tipoung'he's mother was doing the stringed *bonbon* competition with Ticha's mother. They were facing each other, friends before but fighting each other now, swallowing the string in rapid lip movements as the congregation cheered and clapped, to see who will reach the green and red streaked yellow prize first and then swallow that too. His mother won and they were thrilled, their mouths watering for a new sensation, and when she returned to her seat besides the kids she cracked the *bonbon* with her front teeth and gave the bits to Tipoung'he and the other children. Then another pair came up and did the *dodokido* harlequin dance, the congregation again clapping and humming as the two twisted and hopped according to rhythm. Finally, mysteries of the Nativity during which Tipoung'he sneaked away to join his sisters and the others behind the cloth that screened off the stage because he was baby Christ, expected to cry in heart-rending sobs of the after-birth shock, and after which preacher Godlove, giving thanks to Bâ Yahweh, called on the people to examine their hearts and stop lying and cheating and to love their neighbours as themselves because Bâ had carried away their burdens. Tipoung'he's sister who was in college and two others read from the Bible and the preacher read in *Mungakaa* and the congregation

sang about Yesu, *moni* Yosef and Maria Madalena. But the children were impatient for another ritual and the following day, dressed like clowns, they went around the quarter in groups, singing and dancing.

*Christmas don come  
Papa give me something!*

And because the men were already out drinking with their friends, the young celebrants were ingenious in their insistence, *Massa no dey, Mami dey! Mami no dey, Massa dey!* So they were fed and their juju rewarded with 5 francs or 10 francs if there was no change.

And so, eventually, the turbulence of Tipoung'he's days at Ntoh were a mixture of headaches and stomachache, when he feared his mother would feel his forehead and detecting no temperature would chase him to school; and because of the fear of being found out he groaned under pains of a chronic belly virus, did his mother not remember the three-day fungus-covered *achu'* he swallowed last night? His mother was doubtful if they ate that at all, but the wriggling child gave her no time to reflect, and she quickly laid him in bed and went into a frenzy to prepare a concoction of herbs. As soon as the last person left for the farms, Tipoung'he skipped out of bed and yelled at the other kids and they invaded every bird nest and tied the young ones with plaiting thread so they could not fly away when the moment came. Or, to diversify, they played mammy and papa, their naughty children scorned or cuddled accordingly, and then talk and laugh like big men and Anderiya said they must sleep at night until he said it was dawn. He plucked out tassels from maize that skirted the bamboo ceiling and tore pages out of their old exercise books and rolled their cigarettes. The tassel was wild and their mouths became raw instantly and dribbled as they scratched their heads and their eyes watered. Yet, big people they had become until the shadow of the pear tree fell across the door and they transformed once more into helpless kids with a burden to fetch water and firewood. And his mother thanked him, the half-legged father of my husband, she said, and added, you can be good when you wish to; here, taste the sauce if the salt is okay. He licked his palm and listened with the ears of his tongue and yes, the *kamwa*



was a bit short but the salt okay. His mother laughed and said he should wait until he was married before imitating his father. And when he asked her when, she said when he shall be as big as his father, with many farms and able to travel a lot. He wanted to tell her that Anderiya was papa in the afternoon, but quickly remembered why he had absented from school.

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The holidays were indeed holy with rascally abundance; they set traps that never disturbed a fly and hunted squirrels and only succeeded to frighten them farther abroad until 'Tipoung'he was weary of it all and desired to be back in school with his friends, and rewarded by his teachers with half a biscuit for every correct answer. Mingling with his class four friends who were always bigger, and sucking his fingers to get the last flavour of the biscuit, 'Tipoung'he often remembered his father's insistence to Penn that the boy was too tiny to walk the seven miles every day to and from school, the hills to climb, the rivers to cross with their lone slippery bridges during rain, and then the whip and the bullies (and 'Tipoung'he knew even then that he was wrong), especially when his hand could barely cross the roof of his head. Yet, he startled them and his teacher with a dimple had testified to every step the boy took in the first two classes, stumbled in the third because Tanah promised to kill him if he did not do his sums first and 'Tipoung'he was too scared to report to the teacher or to Penn, and then progressed through the other classes like a breeze, forever scared of the huge Black Book in the Headmaster's office. So he always tried to stay out of troubled waters as Mr Chofor warned, and walk the paths of God adding that, 'Boys and girls, don't trouble trouble until trouble troubles you!' That was the golden rule by which good citizens were bred, he said, and they were good if their names never entered the Black Book. But Mr Baadoh was a bad teacher, the pupils whispered, a Cain whose manual labour was like slavery during which time he required them to bring poles and bamboos for fences that enclosed the urinary and the toilets, partition the boys' from the girls,' and with palm fronds or elephant grass stocks screened off the spaces. Mr Baadoh did not care if the log crushed the little ones until the

Headmaster drew his attention to the need for proportionate assignment, and then he looked at 'Tipoung'he and the others with a grudge and asked them to step out of the enclosure. They were to fetch bitterleaf from the bushes for his soup, and wash the bitterness out of the vegetable before the period was over, or else receive a bit of pepper from him. No pupil who had tasted of Mr Baadoh's pepper would desire a second dose. For his whip slashed the backs of stubborn pupils and it seemed all of them were stubborn youngmen troubling trouble. Thereafter, the big boys collected bits of the cane after it cracked on their backs and vowed to make Mr Baadoh see, who did he think he was, a stranger beating them as if they were his children! They were going to throw the bits into a termites mound and as the insects gnawed at the pieces furiously Mr Baadoh's arm that had swung the cane would be affected by rashes and then rot to the bone. He shall see, they threatened, and 'Tipoung'he and his friends looked forward to the miracle. But they went on holidays and by the time they returned in September, Mr Baadoh had been transferred to Besi and the boys said he had smelled the rat and escaped, or learned not to trouble trouble when it had not yet troubled him!

Often, the Manager visited the schools under his jurisdiction and during such visits the teachers forgot their canes at home and smiled with all the pupils for a few days before and after the visit. The Manager was a naughty fellow, they said, who talked to the pupils indiscriminately, and who knows what an imp would say in Pidgin English to the boss, and the recriminations? So the Manager came into the classes and was impressed with the fatherly mentoring, and nodded his approval and said that was the corner stone of the Christian mission in educating the young ones as the leaders of tomorrow, and whose patriotic and religious songs of welcome, earlier, had stifled his doubts. He had been disturbed with growing reports of gross immorality and falling standards in some of the renowned schools, and so made a note of what he saw in Nyenmechop for future reference and necessary prescription. Watching the teachers as they walked among the pupils correcting their work, the Manager's heart throbbed with a pain that was not pain and he heard again in the numb throbbing the songs of patriotism and remembered a time when he was instrumental in

advocating a gelling of Christian teaching and patriotism. The old guard had snorted at his propositions, but by some miracle he had lobbied the moderate block to his side and soon there was no reason why the church could not champion the political momentum that gripped and transformed the country. So independence songs soon flowed from the souls of his Young Presbyterians, a pacesetting gamble that hailed Foncha in his new country, and waving from his motorcade in the name of the Federal establishment, and who could doubt the future then that was to be bequeathed to the young ones! He was tempted on the strength of the moment to ask what happened to that fervour. He had been part of a dissenting group on the eve of Reunification and only his cassock saved him by disguising his rhetoric every Sunday. Even then, suddenly, he was appointed into a more secular position in the church, to oversee the educational health of the Ngemba region. But about to ask the question now, his own further reflection reminded him that Caesar and Christ never drank from the same *njangi* pot even if they tolerated each other. So he had nodded benignly when the children switched to Christsongs, the bedrock of all, and the alibi for him to sidetrack his straying thoughts. Fatherly concern and brotherly love, the Manager had said in conclusion to his brief remark to the assembly, and was ready to repeat himself again now that he was witness to exemplary mentoring in the classrooms, must be the guiding principle and the school family was to help the Headmaster and the Church to steer the institution toward higher heights and fulfil its lofty mission to the community, the nation, and to God.

But Tipoung'he toiled at his books that increased as he changed classes, and pulled at the suspenders of his blue knickers that crossed his back like a multiplication sign, trying to understand what  $\delta r^2$  really meant or break through the complexities of BODMAS. He preferred to say it because it sounded like a song, but the teacher insisted and then shouted, that it must be *calculated*, that there were no two ways, and no way out except to calculate, no truancy would be tolerated, and his head began to ache. He tugged at the strings of his shorts as if for inspiration, but only remembered how his mother had devised them to keep him tidy, and how he had turned the wheel of the machine while she guided the cloth, and the needle produced its charring music which varied according to the speed he

applied to the handle. As his books increased in volume and quantity, and the teacher talked about Jeda, brotherly love and the fact that all men are brothers, so too did his fibre bag that shredded his shirt at the shoulders metamorphose into a luridly painted box that scrapped the centre spot on his skull. He thought of the men from whose shoulders long ago he had observed the shinny spots on their head and wondered if they too had been burdened with boxes full of books, when young. But there was probably no school then, which was why the men were all farmers and traders and wine tappers. He wondered too why the lesson said nothing about women and sisters and was tempted to ask the teacher but was afraid of being called a fool.

‘Empty vessels,’ the teacher had said, ‘make the loudest noise and every fool is an empty vessel and ask too many empty questions.’

He would have loved also to know how many questions make too many questions so as to know then whether or not he was an empty vessel or about to become one. But his marks were good so he did not bother much, and only Arithmetic dragged him backwards especially during ‘mentals’ when tiny bits of sweat appeared on the tip of his nose. English was his best, and he could feel the words, jelly substances that ran through his blood and dripped into his pen and through the nip, and were spelled, and the teacher said he shall be an English teacher.

Then he began to discriminate between what was his or who benefited from it, and mocked the begging pupil who pleaded for his gum or blotting paper to erase a blunder or mop off the ink from his fountain pen.

‘LTBY!’ he said, pouting and challenging, and thereafter spent time reconciling himself with the ways of God in order not to be singled out by preacher Godlove on Sunday, without anyone telling him the facts, as evidence of those who refuse to share. But LTBY was a game that was difficult to resist, and the beggar today became the challenger tomorrow, the buyer today and beggar tomorrow. Then they discovered the magic of the sharpener, when his father bought him one in Bamenda, which sizzled gently in the hand with a mute crunching as he turned the pencil and watched the wood peel off in coiling strings that rolled onto the desk or simply broke off with the gentlest of touch. The others crowded him in turns and before

they knew what was happening to them their pencils became stumps, too short at times to handle, and they stared in wonder and laughed with pain because the others were laughing.

Tipoung'he had picked up the lingering habits that crept into the heads of even the most cautious child, and his mother noticed this immediately a 25 francs coin was missing from her *njangi* money. She searched her other purses just to be sure. Then someone had seen Tipoung'he sharing *puff-puff* to the other children around the Square, and his mother sent for him.

'Taa,' she said, 'did you see 25 francs from my *njangi* money?'

'No, mother,' he said as if something blocked his throat and she invited him to join in the search for her missing fortune. Then suddenly, having gone behind the house to search there, Tipoung'he screamed, *I have seen it mother, some of it!*

'Bring it, father of my husband,' she said; 'only you have eyes.'

The boy held out his hand in which a 10 francs coin glittered. His mother grabbed the hand and a whip materialised from nowhere and slashed Tipoung'he's buttocks and back and head. He howled with shame until his mother who had been asking how 25 francs became 10 francs was panting as the boy kicked out and the other children gathered to see. He was dragged into the house where he slumped into a broken 'sleep' chair. His mother produced a bamboo slit and gave him.

'Clean your tongue with this and throw into the fire and vow never to take what does not belong to you.'

He did as instructed while his mother said: 'Be a thief of minute things if you wish, and we will never know what you died of.'

Moaning miserably while clinging onto the bed pole nearby, the boy remembered that only a while ago he was the hero pinching out benevolence in cautious generosity, but now humiliated as a thief. He had thought his mother would never notice the negligible amount from the bundle that had notes and even the Congo fifty. Chastised by shame and his own foolishness, he thought of his mother's predictions about the cause of his death if he continued to desire little things. But what if they were big things? So he began to have a sense of big things in discrimination, wherever his imagination led him, always out of proportion to his size. In the story of the two black birds, Peter and Paul, sitting on a wall, he had thought of

flying away, like the paper birds on their fingernails disappearing only to reappear, or flying as in his dreams, over mountains and tree tops, away from the fear of things that needed physical attention that Tanah loved. Anderiya stood by him as on the day they first entered Ntoh, guard and guide, under rain and sun, and no bully would thrust a finger into his eye and go free because Anderiya would break it. But big books and big names like big places and big dreams plagued his peace and took him away even from Anderiya. People on the move, he said to himself always remembering the abridged history of kings and empires, even if he did not know where to. His was an inspiring destination with no end. The other children noticed his impatience and started complaining about his memory; he remembered too many things, they protested, and could easily tell tales. Their English teacher had said it was gentlemanly to say tell tales than to say tell lies. But Tipoung'he frowned and told himself that it was not a sin and not his fault to remember. When he remembered what was pleasing his friends laughed and encouraged him, but when memory hurt them they called him a dreamer and a capital fool. Only Anderiya protested and stood by him and said yes, it was true. Big and sometimes awful things crawled back from a region of the past where his dreams dangled on strings of soft milky sunrises stretching out to hold him in a warm embrace from behind fog-skirted hills in the distance of a childhood that refused to go away. He only had to close his eyes and then he was there, in the presence of that which many forgot or could not feel. And that was long ago now, so long he often wondered too if he were not dreaming them up, and suddenly opening his eyes and looking down he was awed by the rapid rise and fall of his left breast where their teacher said the heart was lodged, and the sketch on the blackboard proved it.

Everybody said so too, that he had a big heart, too big for his age. Their teacher who caught huge snakes and horned lizards and imprisoned them in *bonbon* bottles with rubber-strapped lids filled with a kind of liquid so that they should not rot, and then demonstrated during his lessons, said he was Samson with no Delilah. Mr Ndipifon always sent Tipoung'he and two others to clean his place during manual labour, and as they worked he would walk in with his friends and put on the record about Samson and

Delilah. The scratchy sounds as the disc spun on the padded cylinder slowly led out the soft melody like church songs. So although Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he did not understand them, and listened to the record as if for a clue, he was frightened by the weight of their predictions: big hearts mean big trouble, the teacher's friend said and laughed.

At home old Tipong came to see his father in order to discuss 'business' before he disappeared again to Aghem. His father usually bought coffee 'on the farms' and when the harvest was done Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he and the other children accompanied him or Meuh or Penn to the debtor's house with an enlarged tin to measure the produce. He had found it convenient to 'disappear' before Ngheyu because often he would go to the market and pretend not to know an old man who will then ask, 'if you don't know me, and live with your wife today, do you mean to say you picked your kolanut under a pear tree?' And Alioum laughed and said he was only pretending and then gave the old man 'something.' Tipong met his father sharing two bottles of Beaufort and Special with his friends and quickly pulled a chair from the shadows and sat down and searched for his horn. After sucking away the foam for a refill, he was distracted and opened his eyes wide as if he were about to scream and poked a stumpy finger into Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he's open breast and again stared in disbelief.

'He shall be a big man,' he announced, twisting his finger tip around the protruding bone where his ribs met, and the boy pulled his shirt together, staggered and gathered his beer corks that had dropped from his cupped hands.

'See this?' Tipong said, leaning forward in a stooping lurch to make sure and for the others to see and agree. Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he hated him because he beat his father's sister who refused to marry him. Tipong waited for her along the farm paths and tore her dress and tried to carry her to his house until the quarter met and said that was a mad way to do things. So he paid his fine and everybody drank and laughed, but Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he still saw him as a bad man.

The others looked with blurred eyes and saw the mark and yes, the signs were there in the exposed ribs and neck bones; only the boy looked so pale with fright standing on thin legs his father doubted if he was going to survive even their scrutiny. Then he asked himself again, and finding no satisfactory answer in his heart, turned to the

others, if he had done the right thing, what do they think, to take the boy away from his siblings? It was a rare concession to his manly decision, for he still believed in his own nimble mind to confront the world and take it on, for his family. To bring up the boy in the village had been a self-vindicating gesture, which he now saw as selfish, against the semi-urbanised demons, tearing his heart out. No one, not even his close friends offered an opinion, never sure of how to appease a man whose personality was a hard nut to crack. But Tipong said the boy shall know how to tap raffia and so be more than his brothers, and Ndimagha asked what was wrong with a boy learning about his ancestors and their Gods. Tipoung'he frowned at the prospects, remembering the dew and the cold in the morning and wanted to run away from the grumpy voices but Ndimagha' was laughing in his rumbling manner at something Tapindoh had said and Tipoung'he tarried to hear what it was.

'I was sitting with my father in his house,' Tapindoh was saying, 'when all of a sudden an iron staff came in with an imposing thud, followed by the wobbling limbs of Ndipipen.'

'And that is a man not even capable of staffing his walk,' Ndimagha' said.

'How can you say that of such an elder?' Tipong said, pinching a bit of snuff into his hairy nostrils.

'Why not?' Ndimagha' went on; 'not everyone who carries a gun is a shooter or owns it. And he is a slave too, and therefore a no-needs where men are men, do you see?'

The others saw, and laughed. Tipong suppressed a sneeze and instead spat freely in the corner and watching him from between his father's legs Tipoung'he wanted to say that was bad manners as their teacher would say, but Tapindoh had picked up the trail of the story where he left off.

'As you know,' he went on even if the others had no idea about what he was saying, 'Ndipipen had snatched the daughter of my father's brother.'

'You mean Muluhkoh's child?' Ndimagha' cut in.

'Yes, the rascal.'

'I did not know Ndipipen was that bold,' Ndimagha' said.

'Well,' the other said impatiently, 'when it comes to under-navel cargo you may be surprised to know that there is no cripple in Nyenmechop. So Ndipipen wanted my father to give his blessings



to the deal without which bloody feuds would have followed. As you know, Muluhkoh calls a man swine who is foolish enough to step on his toes, and would have tied a red scarf around his neck and gone abroad wielding his double-edge machete with a war cry on his lips. So Ndipipen brought two calabashes of raffia but my father regarded the drink and his entourage with scorn and asked if the people of Nyenmechop still go for knock-door without a bottle of beer at least. Even if Ndipipen decided to be ignorant and forgot the bottle of something hot, how comes that those of you following him, my father said, especially you Asob'shi and Asob'mbangni, could not advice him like men should their friend and brother? Times have changed and any Nyenmechop man who calls himself a man amongst men, should walk according to the times. And he went on until Ndipipen nearly crumbled on his feet because my father would not ask him to sit down.'

'And that is exactly how you should talk to a slave,' Ndimagha' said, nodding repeatedly. 'But did your father drink the raffia?'

Tapindoh's eyes popped out.

'My father?' he said; 'the dog that never shits in another's latrine? He simply asked Ndipipen to carry his *mimbo* back to his *ntang* and then go to Asob'tah from where he bought Metsi's mother and ask how much he paid and in what form, on behalf of his brother. 'If you can pay as much, as a man should do who boasts of something between his legs, then take your wife when you are ready.'

'Your father was always a proud beggar,' Ndimagha' said, 'and never ate a Metta woman's shit because of her tin of oil.'

'Is that not how men should behave?' Alioum said and Tipoung'he looked up, twisting his neck and suspending his elbows on the old man's knees where he was shielding from the rough tongues.

'So what did the rascal do?' Tipong asked, curious like the rest, a repentant glint showing in his snuff-tainted eyes.

Tapindoh laughed and drank from his half frothy glass.

'What shall meat do if it refuses fire?' he said and drank again. 'That was the last we saw of him, the outcry against him was too much and he tried other shortcuts without success and started accusing my father of refusing him his wife. Two moons later, Ndey Atsou' came and properly opened negotiations for his wife and shortly after took her to Doumbou.'

Tipoung'he thought about meat in fire and the way the old man had narrated the story, and his mouth watered, remembering how his father sliced theirs in fat strings and hung them over the fireplace. Once, when they were alone they had pinched it and roasted it in the fire and the fats sparked the flames. But Alioum caught the smell from his room where they thought he was sleeping and whipped them because he would not sit and watch them grow like Alakah's children, all wild and taking what was not theirs. That was in Aghem and seemed a long time now but in the village Meuh usually spiced her sauce and soup with dry hide which his father sent or brought at the end of every month. She cooked it to almost paste because the army injection knocked out all her teeth and she munched everything like the clown with a red nose in Mishe Didong's Fine Country. When the rains came Meuh harvested a variety of mushrooms and dried the surplus and when the rains went away and the rivers dried up, she fetched tadpoles from the shallow streams beneath the stones and pierced them through the eyes with tiny bamboo splinters which dangled above the fireplace, strung together like a *Cicam* pattern, with a rare string of *red* meat. She would then bury a splinter into the hot ashes for a few seconds and then scattered them with her thumb and two fingers into their *achu'* and the bitterish taste made the sauce 'strong.' But he still thought of his meaty days of plenty in Aghem and planned to ask Meuh about what happens when meat refuses fire.

The men were distracted by shouts coming from the Square and their knees crackled as the got up in confusion.

'Every springy footfall soon develops a sprain,' Tapindoh laughed, watching Ndimagha reach for his stick.

'You have said it all,' Alioum said, 'once we were men, but now the shoe no longer grips the earth where we stand. We are all empty tins now with only the smell and no snuff in them.'

They all laughed, gathering their things as the cries from the Square increased. Tipoung'he rushed ahead and was already wriggling through the crowd that had gathered around the stunted eucalyptus tree which served as the community notice board. On the ground a man grunted about his ribs, but resisting efforts to drag him onto his feet. As Tipoung'he watched and cringed every time the frustrated blows fell on the man who was accused in many

ways of stealing a chicken, his eyes flashed up and down the contorted tree stem on which posters scribbled on the pages of twenty-leaf exercise books and glued with lumps of *achu* were falling off. Without bothering to read, Tipoung he knew what was on some of them, the monotonous rephrasing of either Saturday night dance or a Sunday Tea-time, spelled *tee* or simply *T*. What, his mind echoed, and dance, dance, dance, he replied silently. The question and answer sequence followed to when, where, and time and fees. He frowned involuntarily on the last, considering why it always had to be boys 25 francs and girls free. He had told his mother that he should like to be a girl when she delivers him again, and she had laughed. When he asked why she was laughing, since the girls had advantages during dances, his mother had only replied that he shall understand when he grows up. Frustrated in his reverie, he struck off the conclusion of other matters on the poster which said 'Come one, come all.' He loved the dances during holidays because then his sisters returned from college and talked to the boys at the gate and they allowed him and Anderiya to sneak in and watch from the corner as the dancers followed the rhythm, whether Soukouss, Jerk, Jicco, Makossa, or Blues. Then after about two hours of dancing, the MC would announce that after two more they would all go outside and consider the kerosene and batteries. The dancers would cry out in protest and the MC would say, 'Okay, one more,' which made three free records. After that the girls would cluster together in the corner and the boys grumbled aloud on their way out. But the real 'guys' who did not want to be treated as 'amongst,' settled their fees and began forming their line against the wall, their *patte d'elephant* flowing freely over their salamander heels, some of which were oiled with Vaseline, as the first record scratched itself into life, and awaited the ladies to cross the floor timidly and pick their gents. The lucky guys stepped aside gingerly and created space for their ladies and soon the unlucky ones invaded the corner where the shy girls screamed with muted alarm. It was what they loved and expected but the boys, especially the *gainakobs* were always so forward the girls' heads spun with shame because the boys also smelled of *abendih* and *alabinda*. The dancing would eventually be interrupted by request time when the boys requested their favourite songs for 5 francs for the short play and 10 francs for the long play, and went

for their sweethearts or a targeted 'chick' who had been avoiding them all evening. In other matters on the request sheet, Tipoung'he again whispered other monotonous phrases, 'it's good to be good,' 'no condition is permanent,' or 'no dancing in the corner!' Often, this last sparked a brawl, when a naughty chop-pepper *gainakoh* challenged the over-sabi college boys and girls and invaded the cherished acumen. But his sisters searched for them and before screams of 'the lamp, the lamp!' or 'the speaker, unhook it!' filled the air, they were already cutting across their uncle's yard and that was the end of the long-awaited night.

'Villagers,' his sister said with spite, 'they'll always remain bushmen!'

She was a form three college girl and would never mingle with the retarded species which should be grateful whenever she showed her face at their backward scenes; instead of which they choose to remain *les sauvages*. The others laughed in the night at the beautiful sound which she consciously dragged out and spent the following days learning how to pronounce it. She would teach them how to speak French and it was exciting to say *moi parler, tu parler? Tu parle comme qui?* When their mother asked for the translation and they told her, she laughed and said so it means, *who bi you?*

Another scream brought Tipoung'he back to the stumpy tree where they were pounding on the thief, now curled into a *katabeef*, only moaning about his rib that was crushed, God knows, please have pity. They called him Toroki because he didn't know how to die, the people said, and that even when forced he always refused to die. Whenever the crowd caught up with him after one of his frequent 'snatches' and fell on him with the vengeance of accumulated humiliation, the fists and clubs and rubber whips from goat tether hitting and lashing, Toroki simply slipped into his shell and whip and blow as they would, the crowd never succeeded to drag him out of the patchy thing. He groaned, yes, moaned and whimpered too in pathetic ramblings of orphan destitution – that was all the furious crowd got out of him, panting and cursing – and his eyes blinked strangely like night and day flipping in succession and finally turned pale white, a vague pall, and then a quick gasp of fear ran through the crowd like a shudder, *beiii!* Then quick, silent steps in retreat and denial, a spontaneous reaction of communal

consciousness, already weaving alibis and constructing sympathetic eulogies, for did they not know that Toroki was a good man, a man of his people, even with his unfortunate indulgence in petit acts of shame? And retreating stealthily, they abandoned him to the gathering demons of night to finish. But by dawn, Toroki was no where to be found. Taapishi the wine-tapper was the first to raise the alarm; there were no footsteps anywhere, Toroki had again performed a miracle and vanished with the night like the morning dew under heat of the rising sun. Speculations and testimonies at Man di Loss over bottles of beer, knowing that it was only a brief reprieve before another miracle will hurl Toroki back loaded with beer at the back of a battered Toyota Stout with which to resurrect his fallowed off licence where the people never knew what it meant to be 'off,' and Toroki suddenly became Santa Claus, his sins forgiven, even forgotten, and his benevolence honoured with libations of abundance from their bottles, for the stone to turn into dust where his feet tread.

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At times, when his feet shuffled away from the other children into the lush of the coffee farm below the compound to suck the ripe coffee seed as substitute for the scanty bowl because his mother had gone to Aghem to harvest her groundnuts, Tipounghe placed his right hand gently around the area where his heart was supposed to be. He rubbed the spot with a tender massaging movement, felt the almost exposed cage of ribs and finally sighed in disappointment and muttered to himself: 'They don't even know what they are saying.' His heart was beating fast, always beating fast as if afraid of its own rhythm and the predictions of the elders, the dull throb of the vibration against his moist palm. Physically he was frail and thought himself harmless and everyone said he could not even hurt a fly. And a coward too, Taanah said, because he could not stand the sight of blood. He vowed never to fight even for the juiciest Adam's fruit which Meuh shared to them as reward for thrashing her beans, and often she will just leave the fruits in the bowl for the kids to help themselves. Taanah of course would help himself to more than half the lot and dare anyone with two heads to challenge

him. While the others dared and received a good spank for their troubles, Tipoung'he walked away telling himself, after all, what is food? 'All is vanity,' the teacher had said during Religion, and Tipoung'he took that as a motto for his pacifist comportment. He always looked for excuses to justify himself, and never engaged in *para-para* pastimes where Taanah was the hero. Unlike the other children, he could not watch his uncle's knife slash the chicken's neck, its wings stretched backwards and its legs in the opposite direction, the uncle's feet pinning wings and legs to the ground as the poor thing struggled in quick spasms of death, trapped, its blood trickling into a small hole dug with the tip of the knife, until the shit of death came out like a shrill. Tipounghe knew what to expect after that, when his uncle deposited the head, entrails, and legs into a bowl to feed his endless bias for his town-boy. It did not matter that a moment ago the fowl was alive, quacking and begging for life, and that the others now clamoured around him who barely peeped at the incident, offering apologies and promises, and forging instant friendships in anticipation of sucking fingers. The fear of blood passed away into knowledge of what was soon to come. Penn used his knife to open the gizzard and the children were always amazed at the sandy engine in the fowl's stomach where the grain was ground. Penn passed the open gizzard over the flame and tore off the lining that looked like the plastic which his mother fitted into the waist band of his knickers. Still with the knife, Penn cleaned away the shit and quickly shuffled rubbish over the blood that had already been absorbed by the dry earth. Tipounghe however enjoyed the elaborate ritual of preparing his 'taste' bits, thinking dead blood never hurts, and picking every feather from the head after dipping it into the hot water that had been prepared for his uncle. Then he pulled at the beak with his weak fingers and had to pull again and twist and felt a thrilling sensation as the exposed cartilage slipped through his fingers, white as a newly laid egg. As he tore off the scaly skin and talons of the legs, Tipoung'he recalled the story that Meuh told them, of how Misonkwa blew at his nail-horn on the night of the big fight to determine who was to be suitor for the King's daughter. Tipoung'he smiled at the beauty of Misonkwa's song, *isou ké-wini, sou ké-wini sou Ngamcho*, and mechanically the entrails slipped through his fingers, delicately squeezed, and the

grey paste slipped onto a leaf until he could detect no dark spot along the silky column. After rinsing his booty in the water basin which his uncle had used, Tipounghe wrapped the entrails around the legs and head of the chicken and anticipate the moment of tasting.

He was entangled by the heavy coffee branches and in the quietness felt his heartbeat inside his ear and wanted to think of Aghem. But if he remembered too many things, as they say, and did not know when to talk, what was he to do? And when he started, he did not know when to stop. So they called him Tengum, the blind sorcerer from Widikum who revealed everybody's secret even of the dead without flinching, conjuring the dead to come and testify against the living and the wicked. With his mouth, then, 'Tipoung'he fought back in frustration, trembling in every vein but was easily overcome because then he stammered. Even so, his big heart was left bruised and mocked. Only Anderiya and Meuh with her wobbling mouth rescued him from total humiliation. But what was it that he remembered which made the others mad? The more he tried to think, the more he became dull, unable to remember even his own name. Then he wondered if we remember by not trying to remember? Then how can we tell a story as in school without remembering? Once he started to think and to make an effort to remember, he felt his head begin to warm inside like tiny needles were pricking his skull from within. So he gave up, frowning. Still, the others insisted, he had big eyes that saw too much, a big head that will never forget, and a big mouth that will never remain close. One day he asked Meuh why the others laughed at him so much, but she told him not to worry; they did not know what they were saying, and were jealous of his shoes and clothes, she said, her toothless mouth offering a smile that cajoled his anxiety.

But when they had all sued for peace and were gathered around the wooden bowl for their *achu* lunch, grunting gently like suckling piglets, sucking their fingers, Taanah reminded them, after the meat has been shared, of the preacher's advice to again share with your brothers and sisters, and by which means instead of using his fists he wrapped his godly tongue around their slices. Without them realising his game, the others conceded their share and Taanah said he would never beat them again, and eventually taking turns during

storytelling 'Tipoung'he was led back to his distant abode, and his mind dragged grey or smiling or indifferent faces from the shadows, each to unlock the gates of memory or testify or conclude. The others listened and 'Tipoung'he told them again of things and places they had never heard about and each time the story was like new. It did not matter how many times they were told the same story, it mattered that the variations and apparitions suddenly fused them with those distances and images; they clung to the magic, and watching them hypnotised, 'Tipoung'he forgot about his fears and their insults. They were all happy and the only noise that disturbed the small gathering was the frothy sound from Miyu's nostrils, if he did not slash it away with the back of his hand across his jowl. And as they listened, 'Tipoung'he's recollection grew stronger until everything seemed so real again to him who had lived them in reality and in his dreams thereafter. At night, cuddled in his bamboo bed with the dry grass sticking out of the sewn fertiliser bags, he went over his stories again and again. It disturbed him the way things tumbled back almost oppressive in a heart-beating liveliness, and he felt tears in his eyes, thinking of the past, of distances and of his family printed forever on the plates of his memory.



## Chapter Two

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### The Shoot from Aghem

**A**lioum was a lanky fellow whose fate seemed to be connected naturally to the hills. A second generation of Nyenmechop truants who had refused to be tamed by the white man's magic of a book and a book's spear, they got into their own shoes by themselves, however menially, after scratching and picking every particle of gain from prospects of loss and were always suspicious of an Igboman's smile. Eventually, they had saddled themselves on hazardous winds, patching a dream here and dismantling another there, on the eve of independence. In those days, fine-tuned voices crisscrossed their part of the Trust Territory and lobbied for votes for or against Lagos, and for or against Yaoundé, for it had to be one or the other, in the name of independence.

'If the Sahara was bad and the Kalahari was bad,' someone asked then, 'how was a forest man to choose between the two places without getting confused and losing himself?'

But no one listened and in their confusion, the new adventurers promised everything from Nyenmechop to Jericho and back within a single phrase, shook blistered palms and offered plastic smiles.

'Why, with your own brothers in control,' they boasted 'and up the plum tree, how could you famish after unripe plums, wouna tell me contri pipou!'

Solid arguments, and blazing Land Rovers with loud speakers and even more blazing placards, the *achu'* leaf and gourd versus an umbrella logos; they trailed to the palace to convince the population by first winning the blessings of the Fon. Each delegation in its turn with bags and bottles of gifts swore to remake the world. And the Fon took them in, with open arms, for was the palace not a sanctuary to all, kinsman or not, thief or saviour? Was the Fon's back not covered with scars from frustrated fingernails that must scratch and lay their burdens on his royal back and then expect him

to rescue them all even as they cursed him behind his own back? And rescue them he did with open arms, accepting their gifts and saying, *go my child, go with my blessings*. On election eve, after consulting with his Kingmakers, *Kwi'for* went out in the heart of the night whispering the Fon's choice through palm fronds lintels, and the following day, as if they had known it all along and only waited for royal confirmation, the people agreed, *Tsaapifor had spoken well*.

But Alioum was no longer a village bird trapped to its wild seeds and dawn-to-dusk monotonous routine of clearing and farming and tapping, eating and sleeping and procreating. In need of a new spice in his life, he had vanished from Nyenmechop and reappeared in Mantoung where his fortune sprouted on nomadic fairways from youthful adventures as shepherd-boy to the Fulanis from nowhere who listened to his name and shouted excitedly in *Fulfude*, 'He is Alioum!' But the romance soon came to an end when his father who had spent some years in the coast working for the white man, dragged him away from the hills where life was raw and full of energy into the first Native Authority school that had been commissioned in the palace under the patronage of Tenengfor. School routine was dull and unadventurous and Alioum promised himself not to stay there beyond two *Ngbeyus*. He was tempted by the khaki uniform in which his attendance at the weekly *merengue* shows was to be the talk of the neighbourhood and how the starch cracked in the charcoal-ironed material when he kicked his way across the dance floor, wriggling his thin frame to the High Life. On the first day they were each given the pair brown khaki uniform that fitted awkwardly and seemed to sing in swish-swash when they walked. The next day copies of the Oxford Reader, the *Mungakaa* Bible and hymnal were distributed and Alioum flipped through the pages clumsily, if only to ignite the miracle between his tongue and the scrawled symbols like teacher Ngapiriya, and not rely again on memory for reciting his *Bâ ñi ki-nideng* or the more torturous *Bim Nyikob Bâ mbo'uti-mvi*. He was almost tempted to stay, the story of Shokolokobangoshay almost entrapped him and so sweet and regular too were Tenengfor's bowls of garri and honey during interval. But the isolation of the palace hostel and the bunk beds could not suppress the brute calls from the hills against the learning soul and he sneaked away one night with a small bundle under his armpit

and by morning he had crossed three tribal borders, through Tipah into Alahpapah, and by weekend he was already another herdsman crushing cow horns with his knotty *fikiéné* through narrow hill shoulders in the seasonal cross-country migration for green pasture. He was doomed to vanish from Nyenmechop and follow his steps where the earth was hard and prickly but also soothing to his wild dreams. After a month of herding trespasses, sneaking into farmlands with his herd at night for a wanton grub and out before sunrise, they reached Aghem where a new world opened before Alioum's eyes, one in which his wild adventures, village life, and the trappings of the white man's ways merged in a suspicious existence of patient calculation. His flirtations with nomadic culture paid off in the new environment where *Fulfude* threatened the native tongue and a timidly growing middle class of senior service officials and their 'I-was' niceties.

Aghem was located in the hollow of twisted volcanic ranges over which the historical enemy laboured fatally in tribal feuds, and was as rich in the enactment of its *Nkob* and thunder rituals as its alluvial deposits enticed the hard-muscled migrants invading the place to arouse the consternation of the natives who in angry remonstrance found themselves retreating everyday to the outskirts of the growing town. The Aghem of thatched habitats and a coned skyline was grudgingly ceding its rural outlook to the strange innovation of its Divisional Hospital with its roofed paths and green lawns; the court house where the farmer and grazier swore at each other in blood-cuddling hostilities that scripted another story of the Administration's complicity; and the Vet's office to which the locals abandoned every cat and mouse that was threatened by starvation and rabies.

Alioum soon changed profession and his reputation as chief butcher with a whole stall and three native boy-boys under him placed him at the social junction of rural and urban Aghem. After a year he began to feel the weight in his pockets and indulged in cautious extravagance.

'If you can't save one franc from your hundred,' he said, 'you'll never save the franc from a hundred thousand.'

Sporting an old top hat from Herr Klaus, was the first sign of Alioum's exploding status. The German engineer kept a jealous watch over the agricultural relic of his country's colonial identity,

and came personally in a battered Opel for his brisket and trotters every Saturday, for nothing else tasted so heavenly, he claimed. A pipe and round-rimmed spectacles propped up Alioum's image, and a cane that cracked the heels of his polished pointing-toes, and the hunched shoulders slightly strained the three-piece into an awkward angle. It did not matter though, even with his taller-than-the-market built, especially when the sound of his second-hand bicycle bell hailed an acquaintance who in return hollered, '*I sabi you sab?*' Then the whole rural-town knew he had arrived, and when asked why he no longer talked to them, he laughed.

'What has the bicycle got to do with a petrol station?'

And the people understood; the irony was his own testimony of self-reliance on the broken highway of Aghem at the end of which he had climbed three rungs of the social ladder, from the butchers' syndicate of dangling scale and lodestone through the traders' guild with their jingling pieces of silver, to the senior service *njangi* where his admission was due to the simple reason that all the illustrious members were Alioum's customers, and how could they slam the door in his face and still face him for their choice parts the following day? His shoulders began to fold inward as he looked across the market stalls talking to his boys and taking in everybody but actually seeing none.

News of his prosperity reached Nyenmechop through the traders who came every fortnight with their tobacco and kolanuts and returned with dry hide and groundnuts.

'Alioum is not like that other fool who ruined his life in Melongfam,' Ndimagha' said, commending his childhood friend.

The said fool had spent a decade and a half ploughing coffee plantations in East Cameroun in the hope, year in year out, to return home with a bag of money, but always, the fortune and the returns were re-scheduled every *Bonne Année* eve as part of his resolution. One thing was certain in his mind, he shall return home like a 'moneyman' and a wonder so strong that people shall forget to lock their doors at night after shaking his hand. When he returned at last, it was with fifteen years of shifty memory in his portmanteau and a stray-looking woman who jumped and looked about wildly whenever a child coughed or sneezed. Her eyes twinkled with suspicious foreboding at everything and nothing at all, she was a

wise wizard in a space where yes and no knew no demarcation, and where the past and the present were nothing if not the future captured in her twinkling eyes that threatened and hypnotised. Mishé looked at her and a broad smile of gratitude filled his face, the deep wrinkles of plantation woe suddenly disappeared and he was young again and happy with plans that would serve his people for the next one hundred years. Everything he imagined and uttered was prefaced by a casual ‘dis-donc,’ and how the people loved the very sound from his lips, *dis-donc!* They courted it, dragged it onto their own stiff tongues and blinked with pride to be talking like the men from Mbouda who came on *Ngheyu* with their wares. With time, Mishé became known to every child as Mishé Didong, and he too loved it, proof that his sojourn amongst the plantation layabouts was never in vain, let the men who drank from his pockets but whispered behind him say what they may. He fanned the flames of his own myth by stuffing sweets into the children’s pockets, the most reliable town criers he discovered in Nyenmechop.

‘Mother, mother, Mishé Didong gave us sweets for calling him,’ the kids sang.

But without warning, the rustle of his pockets was quickly replaced by the rare jingle of coins and only a bold face saved Mishé’s gallantry, still squatting with his woman in his late father’s hut and telling those who openly mocked him, ‘mind your business, *je m’en fou!*’ Saturday night escapades all over the village with his Cherie had been part of the growing myth, the double two-step manoeuvres of the Bottle Dance that left Cherie dizzy and her ankles hurt; but these too dwindled to their quarter arena only, where forever conspicuous at the high table, Mishé would stretch out his leg across the exposed laps of Cherie, conscious of eyes that darted across the room and necks that stretched for better view.

‘This na ma car,’ Mishé always announced when the dregs from others’ bottles were playing tricks in his head, tapping Cherie lovingly on the back and the blinking prize smiled in acknowledgement, knowing his meaning without understanding the words. For all his years of vagrancy Mishé never forsook his most cherished rumba and foxtrotted his way with ease through the swinging line of paired dancers swaying to the emcee’s parroting, *all you dancing change position, and dance and change position.* Then Cherie went away without a word

to Mishé, his heart contracted and his lips were sealed on any matter regarding her existence in the here-before or here-after. Soon, Mishé also disappeared only to resurface in Baba Shimoun's cows picking ticks and sneaking into the farms under moonlight to fill his bags.

And because Alioum was not Mishé, he was also not surprised when one evening his brother knocked on his door, a suspicious look in his eyes and presented him with a fig leaf from their ailing father. Even the new town boy knew the significance of the leaf and considered his words before letting them out. They talked all night about the family tree from which the leaf had been plugged and the need to live up to manly deeds especially as their father was almost heeding the call of his ancestors. Alioum understood and said so. Two days later, Penn returned to the village with a wad of money to open talks for Alioum's wife. His popularity spiralled when his wife arrived, accompanied by his father and a delegation of ten. Mezor was a timid girl of about fifteen who had never really known the Nyenmechop of her ancestors. She had grown up with her mother's sister in Tipah and after infrequent visits that lasted for a maximum of one week each time, she finally returned to Nyenmechop on her father's insistence because as he warned, a ripe fruit left for too long on the farm in a foreign land is preyed upon by wild birds. Seeing her husband for the first time, with his fake beard twirled in the manner of the Kaiser whose portrait graced Herr Klaus' parlour, Mezor was suddenly intimidated by the thought of things she could not describe. It was not only the new environment and new faces that gazed at her full face with looks of wonder so different from the indifferent lookers in Nyenmechop or Tipah, but also where she had to sleep, when night came, and how. All these struck fear in her heart and she clung to her husband's stepmother who had strict instructions to make sure the ritual of skipping over the bride, forwards and backwards seven times, was performed. But Alioum saw her innocent fear and vowed that no such ritual would be permitted in *his* home, and instead brought in more beer, *nkang* and *akwacha*, soaked his beard in a rare concoction, to stiffen his spine into the sacred mystery of manhood. The night too threatened him so he turned to his friends and liquor, to boost his ego.

Soon, however, Mezor understood the small multi-ethnic community breeding around their Court Yard neighbourhood, lively tongues from nameless villages dragging her into their cultural distances, and the assurance of being amongst people who knew how one smiled and cried without need to pretend made her feel herself for the first time in her new status. Only when Alioum returned home with a friend did she become alert to the fawning pretence heaped on him by the acquaintance who eyed his bride as if in a spell. But she served them and attended to their wanton comments with a subdued remark or two, always reclining in acquiescence to her husband as her mother had cautioned, and withdrew to her other chores. Her father-in-law, who had finally displaced to Aghem on his son's insistence, and had a nurse assigned to him, was a wonderful companion with a bag of stories about his life in the coast with the white man, at the end of which he was baptised and had a new name.

'Dem be call me the las' Apostle,' he boasted.

But something had hurt his leg and the white doctor advised him in the end to return home where he was sure of more rest and attention. After five years at home there was no change, the leg was still heavy like a stone, the puss an unpleasant sight, and dragged him down. In his chair now, the stories spilled through his lips like *akwacha* through the funnel, and Mezor, learning the brewing trade, would offer him a fresh glass. After taking a mouthful, Chunyin would smack his lips and look at her and say his son was fortunate to have her; and that with him settled down at last, he was ready to meet his ancestors. So the smallness of the ambiguous town, their proximity to everyone who knew everyone and everything in it, fed her confidence and she started to reach out, bargained the price of the *nkwi* spices even though she was not short of cash, and dressed her best on Sunday after which she was terribly shy to follow her husband on an endless round of visits to his friends and tribesmen. She was offered farmland in abundance and after three months of fattening bridehood, she launched into farming, but shocked the night-farming community by refusing to abide by *that* 'tradition.' Soon they started talking, but she did not care, if her husband did not bother. In fact he encouraged it as part of the visitor's way of relating to the indigenes and their ways, and advised her never to

allow herself to be fully embraced. Mamoun, their neighbour agreed and indoctrinated Mezor into what was to be tolerated and what was to be avoided.

‘Give dem too much, then dem insult you,’ she said.

Mezor had to spend some time in the village to know her husband’s people and Alioum accompanied her, very proud that his wife was already ‘beautiful.’ Meuh who was keeping the fire alive in his village house was excited at the news that her wife was coming to be with her for a few weeks. Having abandoned her dilapidating house ten years after the death of her husband to take care of her brother’s property, she fluttered around sweeping the earth floor and arranging the few plates and mostly wooden bowls on the bamboo shelf and because Alioum had gossiped to her about Mezor’s favourite village dish Meuh harvested a good quantity of *mbang* in anticipation of the slippery dish that would soothe her expecting wife. Mezor arrived and settled in with her sister-in-law like siblings and Alioum soon returned to his business. But when they pounded *achu*’ and if Meuh had gone to the farm or was visiting her debtors because they would not pay for her oil, Mezor waited for Penn to provide the sauce. Out of shame he shared his own sauce from other women with Mezor until one day he called her and confessed what Alioum did not know and no one had told her.

‘You come from a big family,’ he said, ‘where the man and head of family prepares sauce. As you know, I don’t have rich in-laws like your father. May be with time, but I try to provide the oil and Alioum sends the hide from Aghem so that the sauce should not be too watery.’

Two days later Penn was late from the market and cursed Tambang all the way home for detaining him too long in the bars and that his tapping would dry up because of the lapse. He had vowed never to tap at night ever since he saw the clashing fires chasing each other over his head on the night Ndam died. But Penn was surprised to find his wine calabash filled and frothing through the leafy cork in the corner. When he called his wife and asked and was told that Mezor had gone tapping when it was getting late, the man simply went back to his room without uttering a word. He had forgotten that his wife came from a family of tappers whose ancestors ran night errands for Asobo-Ntsi before Nwuoupang put an end to the



man's life. Neynmechop had never been the same after that, and probably never would. But Penn was not concerned with past mishaps now, and only boasted so that his friends should not forget his in-law's pedigree. After that he would prolong his drinking sprees or stay late at his age group *alung* where Nkeng's melodious rhythm peeled off the xylophones in a rolling staccato. Even then he heard the tune and its accompanying parts like splinters in his head because his wife whined too much about the abandoned gourds, her pretext for him to come home early, and he would only say, 'Is Mezor not there?' And then add half-drunkenly, 'or has she escaped to her father's compound?' Piqued by the reference to her habitual attitude, Ntsaa stormed out of the room with tight lips and back to her house.

But the village sojourn came to an end and Mezor must return and be with her midwife before the baby's chair turned finally. She was getting tired and sat on the same spot and turned around peeling beans or brushing her hair. She had learned a lot in just a little while and anticipated motherhood with a tickling desire like the little kicks tickling her sides.

'When shall you come and show us our baby?' the women asked, wiping their hands on their dirty wrappers before shaking hands with the tired woman. She smiled and returned their embraces and allowed them to tap her stomach gently.

She instead expected them to come and carry *their* baby, she said, and they agreed in shame, they were just jesting. Of course they shall come, has it ever been heard of the first *ipfourè* performed with a half closed fist as would be the case if she was to bring the child home instead? Alioum was already stocking heaps of dried meat and tins of palm oil with which to pacify the women who shall invade his home and make his life miserable for at least three months.

It was a girl and at a glance it was clear that she bore her father's nose, so he called her Ngum in remembrance of a mother he barely knew. But Mezor did not know what to do with her baby, so tiny and vulnerable in her hands, and Mamoun relieved her and said she would learn with time. Alioum bought everything he thought would make his wife comfortable so that at the end of the breastfeeding period she was plump and the lace flowed over her glistening body like a fairy from lake Aghem. Then the other children began to

arrive almost punctually every two years and as Alioum's wealth grew he gained the membership of more *njangis* in which the civil servants said what was to be said and did what was to be done without fear or favour because they were the last of the High Life generation on whose polished heels the flare of independence wealth showed.

'Who born dog!' they said, and swayed on the strength of their imagination.

With their arms delicately positioned, while tracing the floor to bars of Sir Shina Peters, they adjusted their sagging trousers in snappy waist-band lifts without disrupting the flow of the dance. Until of course Alioum joined, after which with his loud way of daring talk, the other less privileged members began to sneak out of their shells and talked like men who also belonged to the coterie of the Golden Fleece. To his wife's surprise, again supporting her waist with both hands, Alioum enrolled into the Adult Literacy program at the Community Hall, and as if to justify the rash decision, blamed it on a desire to sign his name properly like the rest of his *njangi* members. He had heard the tragedy of his friend in the village who was duped of his fortune at the local credit union, when he thumbprinted for 150.000 francs to prepare his children for school only to realise from his statement months later that it was actually 15.000 franc. The cashier swore on the Holy Bible that the man had withdrawn the money as recorded in his accounts, and his thumbprint was there as proof and can a man challenge the Holy Book on oath?

'Native dullness,' Alioum spat out after listening to the story and added sagely, 'too bad.'

He was determined to complete what he had aborted in search of nomadic mysteries and everyday when he closed his slab and his boys were returning home with his blood-stained apron, he went to the Community Hall, his notebook strapped to his bicycle carriage and his pencil jutting out of his chest pocket like a mini arrow. He clasped the pencil like a spear, and stabbed the paper in frantic effort to write the alphabet and numerals. After twelve months of sweating and sneezing over his books Alioum could spell his name, calculate his money as tabulated on a sheet and faltered miserably at reading. His knowledge of *Mungakaa* conflicted with but also

assisted his reading ability and Mr Nkolo who was assisting them was impressed. Mezor declined the challenge to enrol into the female section and instead requested a sewing machine to which Alioum readily complied. His growing family, two girls and another child on the way, had to appear neat, and he was not very willing to always spend money at the tailor's. He talked to Mamoun and every Saturday, after preparing the family meal, Mezor went to her shed and began by cutting cardboard paper and spinning the wheel for her mistress, and it seemed to her that the child laughed within her with dull kicks to her side.

A consequence of Alioum's edifying craving was his decision to get a transistor radio so as to listen to the news, he boasted, and on his next trip from the village he bought a *National* in Bamenda. Its tuning knobs, covered with Mezor's first 'handwork,' a blue cloth zigzagged at the rim and red and yellow roses crocheted at the four corners, caused the black box with a silver-plaited front to groan like soft knocks in one's stomach or a rumbling stomach itself, and the children gathered around it to listen when Alioum placed it on a low stool to change the batteries. They looked at each other and laughed, tickled by the rumblings when the tuning was done rapidly, and begged their father to stop, stop, when they got hint of a favourite tune or voice, did he not hear *it*? He did not, but their little brother, crushing the two with a naughty force that seemed to gather around his forehead, crawling and staggering to his feet and pushing, seized the other knobs at random and their father had to place the radio on his knees.

'This is the house of the people talking,' he said, pointing to the little rectangular or round shapes stuck to the brown cardboard.

'Why do they never come out so we can see them father?' Metsi asked, her nose that looked like a pencil almost touching one of the houses. She was already going to the local Presbyterian school, and one of the boys who taunted her everyday had said she carried a pencil on her nose. So when the teacher was doing the morning register and called her name and she answered, 'present Sir,' the boy insisted, and his friends agreed in chorus, that she had said 'pencil Sir!' And they sang after her fleeing steps, *Alioum-Metsi, pencil!* Metsi cried the whole day and Alioum had to talk to the teacher to warn the boys.

'They live in their own country,' the father said, wondering if one day he shall hear his little girl's voice over the airwaves.

'Where?' Metsi said, never satisfied with simple answers.

'Far, far away.'

'Where Herr Kruss lived before?' It was Metsi's sister, Wondon, who was a curious nuisance and deformed every strange sound with a native idiosyncrasy.

'Then how do they eat?' she said, more assertive in her curiosity. She dug at the roots of everything until they were exposed by her tiny fingers, in search of answers that must come or no one had any rest.

'A special kind of white man food through these batteries,' the father said, a bit impatient.

'Is this their shit?' Wondon went on, pointing to the thick fluid from one of the batteries that had been replaced.

Alioum had to think quickly. He often warned his children against the use of foul language and even when they coughed, warned them never to swallow the sputum. So that one day when he was having his lunch and the children gathered in their corner awaiting the traditional clash of the bowl covers which announced the opportunity for them to finish the remains, Metsi suddenly realised that with every mouthful their chances of salvaging anything dwindled. Then she choked on her huge saliva and in an effort to free her lungs, coughed a healthy sputum and spat noisily on the floor. Irritated by the assault on his appetite, the father rained a torrent of *Fulfude* invectives on the child, with the most dreaded with which they were familiar without understanding anything coming last, *dam durunwa!* In fury he pushed the bowls away and the children descended on the remaining food like famished wolves. If Alioum did not know the way Mezor fed the children, he would have accused her of starving his children. Even then, she would remind him that no one eats from your plate who did not like you.

'No, just the vomit of one sick child like you,' he said cautiously.

The children exchanged quick glances and then looked and listened again, hoping to find more convincing evidence.

'Are these their roads?' Wondon said, pushing at a coil with her finger.

‘Yes,’ the father said, relieved to be getting out of the corner into which they were squeezing him. He turned the knob and the voices or the music changed and the children stared in wonder. And then their father would ask them to dance and they sprang up and did a ‘twist’ to Armstrong’s rusty voice and jingle as they usually did in Sunday school. But they were interrupted by a familiar drum rhythm to which they had concocted their own lyrics, *Hausa, Kumba, Mamfe, na so-so Bamoun*. Whatever it meant, it pleased them and their father would suddenly ask them to be quiet while he followed the news after three sharp beeps, and during which he repeatedly talked to himself about ‘the poor Biafra man.’ The children did not understand, but when a friend was around they discussed in more elaborate terms about Ojukwo and Gowan, a magic world in the box. And they soon learned to sing after their father’s vibrating voice how *Ojukwo don fear Go-wan*, and stamped around the yard in martial strides.

By the time Tipoung’he was born, some six months after the death of Alioum’s father from his rotting leg over which the doctors hovered and sweated and then failed in their excitement to save him, Alioum was beginning to be bored with urban life as he had been with its nomadic variant years back. He looked at his children and suddenly felt the weight of a guilt that had built in his heart over the years as a zero kept on adding to his credit union account, away from his village and his people. His father had spoken to him at length during his own movements between Nyenmechop and Aghem, but Alioum always said there was still time. For the one month that he was in Nyenmechop mourning his father, visiting the shrines and pouring libation, Alioum remembered the dying man’s last words to him: a man who only farms abroad exposes his entire family to famine if there was war in the other village. As he rocked the little boy in his arms and watched the tiny legs kick out in pathetic endeavour, giggling when tickled but crying like a curse when hungry or wet, Alioum wondered if it would serve his father’s spirits at last to plant *this* plantain shoot at home and insure against the days of famine. So when he was five, confirmed victim to ancestral pacification, Tipoung’he was sent to the village to be with his people and know their ways.



## Chapter Three

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### Where the Light Shone

Tipoung'he and his father were squatting in the shallow Mefouh stream that split the two ridges of Kongmben below their compound, washing coffee beans. In order to contain the demons of his growing family, the older man, now beginning to stoop perhaps because of his tall and lanky gait, was shuttling between Aghem and Nyenmechop more regularly as the town's butcher and coffee merchant. Often he would be blessed with desperate offers from villagers whose financial burdens meant that they could not wait for the harvest season when the Nyenmechop Farmers' Cooperative was sure to give them more in addition to accrued bonuses. Either the farm's yield for that season was 'sold' in advance or staked as surety for the loan in return for so many bags below the normal market price.

In the frosty morning Tipoung'he loved to dip his hands into the sticky seeds to feel the sour warmth of fermentation that blew against his nostril. He inhaled the stale smell and rubbed the seeds against the basket until the slimy coating disappeared and then tilted the basket slightly to let the brown water run downstream.

His father looked at him at the task and said suddenly: 'Can you pass your exam if you go to college?'

He looked up, surprised. Their father never discussed his plans with people.

'When?' he said.

'Now,' the old man said, as if angry at being interrogated unnecessarily by the child of his loins.

'But they will soon be closing for Christmas,' he continued, unaware of the father's kneaded brow.

'I know,' and he tried to control his impatience; 'then you accompany your brother and Anderiya after Christmas.' Mbouju had been brought home to complete class seven and their mother too to

look after the coffee farms. But Anderiya was still a big brother and 'Tipoung'he consoled himself with the fact that he had two big brothers although Anderiya knew his heart more than Mbouju.

'But you asked me to repeat the Common Entrance,' he said, uncertain now what to say.

'Now I ask you if you can pass in college.'

What he did not tell the boy was that his friend in Bamenda had nearly screamed his head off when Alioum told him that their village pastor had advised him to allow the boy re-sit the entrance exam.

'They send pastor make yi come preach God,' Pa Akumasab had said, 'not say make yi tell you *when* to send your child to school. Abi, yi be tell you when for work?'

They had laughed and he had returned to the village with a surprise for the boy who was still to get over the torture of staying at home.

'I can try,' 'Tipoung'he said.

Nothing was said about it again. A curious open-endedness often concluded his father's discussions after which he will confess, you can never tie him down to what he did not finalise. That way the children always anticipated him and in so doing always blundered into his traps and because of which, depending on the gravity of the trespass, his belt, or the whip slashed the back from shoulder to buttocks, or the curled fore finger nearly cracked the skull open. Whether it was his own children in Aghem or those of his sibling in Nyenmechop, Alioum applied the same tactics and struck terror in their hearts whenever they heard his approaching cough. But 'Tipoung'he's heart fluttered at the possibility that all of a sudden, without any effort on his part, he will be going to college, and Bamenda again! He had passed the Common Entrance in 'List B' but that was not good enough because every pupil in the centre had passed and the authorities in Bamenda said that was too good to be true and so 'List A' became 'List B' and 'List B' became 'Failed,' signed and sealed, and 'Tipoung'he's fate with it. He wept because all his friends were going to college, and he was to stay in the village to possibly become a *gainakoh*!

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At Christmas Mbouju and Anderiya came home from college and brought with them evidence of the fairyland, the wide streets with tar, the streetlights, so many cars, and storey buildings, although grass also grew in Bamenda and not every place was tarred. But the magic of Christmas had died since they could no longer perform their *Okokoriko* carols around the quarter to feast and be rewarded with money. They were all grown up and their parents feared the *minyongo* society that lured innocent children with juicy chunks of pork in rice and a bit of *manjounga* to dilute their raffia wine. But they had their first pair of trousers of mixed material, and walked up and down the street and pretended not to notice the other children staring at their *flip-flaps*.

Two days before schools re-opened, their father asked 'Tipoung'he to pack his few clothes into Mbouju's box.

They trekked to Foghang to catch a car to Bamenda. To 'Tipoung'he, the four-hour trip was suddenly reduced to just a few minutes. But when they alighted in Bamenda, a shudder went through him; he suddenly felt out of place, and stared at his Dschang-shoes and wished to disappear on the spot. It seemed everybody spotted him from a distance and placed a newcomer tag on him. But Anderiya had to separate from them; he lived in a different part of the town and hired a truckboy for 100 francs.

At home, however, reunited with his sisters who were working in Bamenda, there was laughter and tears as they shook hands and said welcome to 'college boy.'

The three-bedroom house with a packing store faced the 'quarter' road, and was shaded by huge plum trees. An external kitchen was built to the left with a small passage between it and the main building. His sisters occupied the two rooms that opened into the parlour and his brother's room which he was to share, opened, like the parlour, into the yard. 'Tipoung'he looked at the mat ceiling and at the lone bulb hanging from it, saw the grey cable that was threaded into the ceiling and then down the wall to the switch near the door and his fingers itched to flick in on.

'So you say Minister don arrive, eh?' It was a male voice from outside.

His brother and sisters thundered in response. It was as if they had been expecting the voice.

'The Oga himself don arrive,' Wondon said.

First, Tipoung'he noticed the stomach, followed by a face that was shattered by an infectious smile. The man was naked to the waist, and folded the band of his trousers beneath his bulging torso. He carried a familiar smirk in his eyes as if those eyes were burdened by knowledge of too much.

'Wey-bei,' he exclaimed, regarding Tipoung'he with surprise, 'is this the small *massa* that you father wan' send to college?' His speech, Tipoung'he noticed already, was a mixture of English and Pidgin.

He placed his left hand on Tipoung'he's shoulder and regarded him with suspicion. *Small massa*. The phrase hit Tipoung'he like a jab of his father's finger on the skull. It was as if 'small' was a birthmark which even first-time acquaintances identified on his forehead like a sign of the Passover.

'You insisted that he should come, and he has come,' his sister said.

'But I didn't know he was so small,' the man said. Then he suddenly smiled mischievously, 'Yi fit work?' he asked.

'Chei, Pa, just leave'am so!' Metsi protested, but Tipoung'he could see she was feigning anger. She too was enjoying the joke.

'Work na work,' Pa said, 'big man or small man. Who no like salt, even a bit, eh?'

Tipoung'he was shy without knowing why, and wriggled into himself, away from the inquisitive stares. Even as he stood there under the verbal x-rays, he was suddenly shelled beyond their jibes and nodded or smiled mechanically. But it was in vain after a while; he was being summoned to the open, for further interrogation, and he had to submit, and respond timidly. It was an uncomfortable confrontation, unexpected too in all his town-coming enthusiasm, how they could all conspired in such gossipy pleasures against his innocent presence, exposed in the nakedness of his innocence. The more they dug into him, the more he recoiled from the tongue slashes. They wanted to tune him and to possess him and to control his mind finally. So his answers were brief and cautious, weak resistance to the loud expressiveness, and the half-naked fellow whom they referred to as 'Pa' (and Tipoung'he understood was the same person his father called Massa Akumasab) seemed to be pleased with every word he uttered. He was a miracle from which Pa fed some strange

fancy, and dragged the others along in their conjectural estimation of his fate, read from an invisible crystal ball which Pa alone could decipher.

‘So you say this na number four for your father, eh?’ he said, turning to Metsi, already sniffing a new trail for his crystal ball imagination. And without waiting for answer he went on, clapping his hands in wonder.

‘All of you for your father na all sense pass king, eh? See even this small *chochoro*, na so-so pepper,’ he said, disbelief choking his words.

Tipoung’he survived that initial onslaught and began to fit into the renewed family life. But he was often startled by the electric bulb in the evening when, switching on the light, he listened for the magical ‘click.’ It was a hidden voice in the grey cables that traced the walls and were gathered into a small box behind the main door. It was a voice that could also bite, like the round black switch with its protruding up-and-down starter which stung him on the second evening, and he was suddenly paralysed to his toes with fear and wondered if that was how one felt just before dying? He had been washing the dishes and carrying them into the house, when he switched on the light with his wet hand. An invisible hand hit him at the back of his head with a numb blow that connected the jarring tremor down his spinal cord and a stifled cry escaped him as he struggled at the same time to steady the tray of plates and dishes from crashing onto the floor. His sister heard his cry and rushed in from the kitchen.

‘Dummy,’ Wondon said, realising what had happened.

Fear popped his eyes open and he trembled slightly.

‘This is electricity Sah,’ she said mockingly, ‘not your battery-powered torch or *turukang*. You be na come-for-country?’ And she laughed and relieved him of the tray.

Then she showed him the tiny white dot just above the elbow of the switch trigger.

‘The next time you place your wet claws there again,’ she warned, ‘know that we’ll only retrieve your body from Number One.’

And they laughed, for Metsi had rushed to the scene, always ready to gather around a spectacle. Social adjustment, Tipoung’he realised, was not going to be so smooth for him, a process based on

logical progression. His was a leap from place to place, abandoning old familiar meanings for new ones, and expected to rein in all the accoutrements of the strange world. Hijacked and rehabilitated always, he was always learning and catching up, and it was a struggle to remember all the things he had known before. From his Dschang-shoes to his leather *boukarie* as a welcome gift from his sister, his *sans confiance* slippers provided a recognisable bridge; but when it came to the bigger things like electricity, he found himself yawning.

‘What is Number One?’ he asked Mbouju after they had retired to their room.

‘What’s happened?’ he was alarmed.

‘It was sister who said it.’

‘Said what?’

He told him what had happened.

‘It is the mortuary,’ he said, reaching for the hangar.

But Tipoung he did not see the relationship between Number One and the laughter and turned to the *Podium* magazine to feed his eyes on the pictures because every other thing was in French.

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School started but Tipoung he was still staying at home. No college was willing to accept him despite Pa’s bulldozing might. He had been to two institutions already, and none of them were ready to accept him.

‘They say na doubtful case,’ he said to his sisters. ‘But I no understand, because na your tribes people. Why they go deny their own pickin?’

There was a worried expression on his face, almost the expression of guilt. Pa Akumasab was exasperated, and if only the almighty proprietors knew how the man unsettled every niche of inconvenience once he had been pushed into such a state. Years before, when he was a nurse with the West Cameroon Medical Association and residing in the Senior Service quarter below the Fako mountain, Akumasab amazed his patients with an ability to diagnose their conditions as a tribute to the unholy arrangement with East Cameroon, and wondered why no one said a thing about the mess. It did not matter that more than one person said a thing or

two about the situation because ‘weti don change,’ he charged. In his uncoordinated flush of ‘who well eh, Mola,’ he sniffed around wildly to accommodate his neighbours’ diatribes at his doorsteps three times a day, morning shinetime, evening; they were moaning how ‘we-don-tire-this-nonsense-Mola,’ and he spat out complements in subverted high grammar (shredding his bedroom to fetch his syringes) and worried about their hypertension than by his own daily bread, stone-hard. He was curious, a dangerous state for him to be in because then he was mercilessly unpredictable, a live bullet, the astounded neighbours whispered, regarding what they would say or not say about his needles or the expiry date on the penicillin four million bottles. But years later, having switched profession, he began to lick his fingers up the rungs of administrative authority, and only occasionally would the unpredictable take control again.

So he was not going to give up on the boy just yet. And every noon when he returned home for lunch and squeezed his bulk through the kitchen passage to invite Tipoung’he to eat with him, Pa had to drag him from a Hadley Chase novel, a series to which his sister was chronically addicted. Then testimonies between mouthfuls to his mighty punches in the town and assurances to Tipoung’he not to worry because ‘go up come down you must have a place in one of them schools.’ Was he not a big man, one of the very few big men in Bamenda who controlled labour and determined how it was *formed*? In the evening he would then boast to Tipoung’he’s sisters about the lengths to which he could go to humble them if they finally choose to displease him. Has he not been considerate enough toward them by substituting his pride with humility? Not to mention the scandalous fact that he has overlooked gross violations of the Labour Code which, if the abused workers had known, would have cost the schools a small fortune.

‘But you too be lick finger na Pa,’ his sister said, laughing.

‘Yes, of course, I no be stone,’ he said, and scratched his stomach in a habitual way. ‘You know, say na country for chop, I chop.’

There were still a couple of doors to be knocked, he said, before he could acknowledge defeat, if he must.

The following morning Pa came for Tipoung’he in his old Peugeot 404. Tipoung’he was elated to be sitting in the front seat and watched Bamenda rush by, in the morning frenzy. He had seen that before,

the backward rush as he looked out of the car window. His mind took a backwards leap to the afternoon sun beginning to sink rapidly behind the hills of Mile 50 and casting long shadows of Tipoung's future.

But years after, sitting in the front seat of Pa Akumasab's car, listening to Prince Nico, he could see and feel the difference. They were moving forward, he felt the motion, and the movements outside were more regulated, ordinary; people walking or standing and talking and the car approached them and then sped off.

Pa was talking to him about what it meant to go to college. He had been to Ibadan and Makerere, and vowed that there were no better institutions of education on earth anymore.

'All we get now,' he said, 'na *njakiri* school with show-show girls and their no-cross-gutter skirts.'

He had to shout above the blare of Nico Mbarga. It seemed he could not enjoy music at a lower volume.

'See them,' he said pointing at the girls in various uniforms walking along the street, 'with their *yeye* movements. Make sure you don't look at them when you go to college, eh? They go make your head spin like mad and before you know it, dismissal! And then no come look for me!'

Tipoung smiled and said nothing. He was beginning to understand Pa Akumasab and even enjoy his endless stories.

Their first stop was Commercial Providence Institute, an enclosed place that was fronted by an imposing two-storey. The gate man seemed to know Pa Akumasab very well because he removed his cap hastily and bowed repeatedly when the car swerved into the yard.

'Morning Sah!' he shouted, opening the car door and rattled his bones to attention.

'How work?' Pa Akumasab greeted and leapt out on his shortish legs and seemed to dance as he walked.

'Nothing bad, Sah!'

'Your *Patron* dey?'

'Yes Sah,' the man said. Then he shuffled closer and whispered: 'Only too much bad temper this morning Sah! Some naughty *chicha* play *katakata* with some *small* gal,' he said and hissed out the word 'small' to emphasise the gravity of the crime.

At the foot of the staircase Pa Akumasab asked Tipoung'he to wait for him and breezed up the steps with a frightening hop, pulling himself up by the rail. Tipoung'he could see from the signs that the ground floor was for classrooms and the upper floor was administrative business. A few students were in the yard, mostly boys, dressed in green shorts and white shirts. Tipoung'he's heart sank. Even his blue primary school knickers were superior to the college uniform. He had hoped for *long* trousers, his distinctive *pantaloon* in which he was going to dress on market days during holidays and attend dances. But now, how was he to return to the village dressed like one of the prisoners whose humiliation as public enemy number one was placarded across his chest for all to see and learn from?

On the landing Pa Akumasab veered to the right and without bothering to knock he opened the door with his usual *njakiri* tit-bits reserved for the female secretary already dangling from the tip of his tongue. But the room was unusually full with Pa Mamba bouncing on his seat like an agitated god.

'*Wey bei,*' Pa said, 'since when you start for get early morning press conference?'

But his friend was in no mood for a joke. The veins stood on his forehead like an initial sign of the cross and Pa Mamba was rattling away at the consciences of his tutors staring at them with bloodshot eyes of doom.

'Eh, *emboy*, I ask you again,' he was saying, poking his finger into the chest of one of his tutors, 'when you signed your contract, did I or did I not make it crystal clear in no ambiguous terms that there was to be no allusion in thought and in deed to fringe benefits in *my* school?'

He mopped his face furiously and seemed to notice Pa for the first time, whose tit-bits hung miserably from his open mouth, taken aback by the uncharacteristic solemnity of the atmosphere in which he was wont to chat with his friend.

'You did, Sir,' the tutor said as if the confession killed him.

'Then why, why in the name of the Holy Mother,' Mamba cried, 'did you violate the golden rule, why?'

'I see this no be the right time for me to visit,' Pa Akumasab said forcing a smile.

‘Right time?’ Mamba said; ‘will there ever be a right time in this place after the invasion of the serpent? You see ma own ba’luck? You give innocent babies to people you trust to teach, and before you know it, all they do is expose their horrible shame to the kids. Imagine, small, small pickin them, and my dear Sirs no hesitate one moment for drug them into the ways of the devil.’

Once Mamba started on a passionate topic, there was nothing to stop him until the energy burned itself up completely. Akumasab remembered how his son who had been admitted into form four on trail basis simply because of his friendship with Mamba, and especially considering his ‘unacceptable moral conduct’ as his dismissal note from Sasse stipulated, had in a moment of inexplicable madness adorned himself in Akumasab’s Makarere robes and caused a consternation at the graduation ceremony. If the form fives and the tutors found it a laudable initiative and reminder to the authorities about the need to review the dress code for the students, at least the senior ones, Mamba nearly developed a heart attack at the affront and ordered his discipline masters to arraign the boy and strip him of his outlandish feathers. Forced to crumble to his knees in the usual outfit that had been camouflaged by Makerere, the boy listened to a torrent of inconsistent and unintelligible abuses from Mamba.

‘*Emboy*,’ Mamba breathed, ‘which kind *kata-kata* attitude be this, eh?’ His voice trembled dangerously at a crossroads of fatherly emotions with principled tradition.

‘Shameful disorientation of the first category which,’ he went on, ‘but for my full knowledge of your paternal logic, would have provoked a godforsaking wrath such as Sodom and Gomorra would become baby stories.’

Then he scrutinised young Akumasab more closely and cocked his head after the manner of a rare discovery, ‘Or, tell me, *emboy*, you di snuff?’

Even though he pronounced ‘snuff’ as ‘shnub’ and gathered his brows into the ultimate interrogating question mark, the school community had already assimilated his linguistic nuances as a given and jabbed each other in ironic reminiscences of the boss’s grammatological innovations. Inasmuch as he brandished his Makerere-Ibadan credentials and scratched his balding head at



patriotic suggestions that the educational machinery of the nation must rotate according to local prescriptions, he also proclaimed a time-tested query viz, why not ask Romans how the *Caput Mundi* is *not* pronounced? Not that he himself had any ready answer, having privileged administrative to elocution theories, apart from a self-indulging conviction that somehow, you can't do as Romans do while in Rome without first appreciating how they say their say. That was the only guarantee against the youthful onslaught that threatened society with octopus tentacles that borrowed never-heard-of tricks from cultures beyond the seas. He was therefore no stranger to the sinful habit of the young distorting their brain cords with marijuana fumes and then beating their chests with boastful claims of an ingenious ability to skip off the Fakoship and collect shells from the shores of Victoria without blinking.

He had finally sent the boy home limping in humiliation, and it took Pa Akumasab several visits and repeated explanations about the terrible state of collapse in which the boy's IQ was confounded, before Mamba released the precious robes. Even then, the boy was not allowed back into the school community, and had to read his Lawal from the comfort of his sleeping room with a vow to prove Mamba and his cronies wrong when the National Station proclaim his name at the end of the day.

Reading the looks of woe on the tutors' faces, Pa Akumasab was grateful to his foresight that he never agreed to Mamba's enticing prognostics to a shareholding venture, else how would he have responded to the situation? They were both faithful members of the Catholic Men's Association and, if only for formality's sake, had to keep the faith alive.

But the lone female member of staff present wriggled uncomfortably among the condemned lot.

'But, Sir,' she said, 'why do you generalise, if I may ask?'

Mamba was presently crestfallen.

'Sorry, my pickin,' he said, 'I didn't consider that at all. Come, come over here, and abandon that ba'luck group. They're a curse to my vision!'

As he adjusted the sitting area around his secretary's table, he seemed to notice Pa Akumasab again and then was torn between inviting him to sit down too, unorthodox as it was, or ask him to

wait in his office. He looked up, throwing his worry at his friend who saw the dashes at the end of the spark in Mamba's eyes and shuddered into a smile.

'Eheh,' he said coaxingly, 'I no go take long.'

'No, you never do,' Mamba said forcing a smile, 'and before I know it my day is ruined.'

'Then short and simple,' Akumasab said with the look of a man who has been misunderstood all his life, 'na still my old case, remember?'

'No, I no remember,' the other protested. 'You get a thousand and one old cases, I no remember which be which.'

'Ah-ah,' Pa Akumasab ejaculated in surprise, 'just that small case of admission.'

The staff gave themselves the unauthorised treat of subdued laughter, familiar with the contagious case of late admissions attached to familial strings that cut conscience with the precision of a new blade. With Pa Akumasab, a familiar face on campus and a household name in town, there was always a humorous twist that would not leave even mourners indifferent.

'I bi don tell you,' Mamba declared, 'say that one na simply bad case, in fact very bad case, considering the time of the year.'

Pa Akumasab had heard all of this before together with the well woven phrase stringing his brains that even man-know-man circumstances decry a tendency to break rather than tolerably bend the law. Even at Providence, the law was always the law. Pa Akumasab dug his ticklish claws into the fleshy armpits of Mamba's affable side, but failed to trigger even the faintest shadow of comprehension on the blank visage of his friend. He now wished they were alone, in the seclusion of the office where he could stampede reason on Mamba's stubborn pride, but now, from the little titters around, he was only feeding him and his staff a comic relief which for all intents and purposes, was not included in the Mamban Providential Commandments.

After about ten minutes of vainly clawing at Mamba's king-farmer mind that was engaged in adding pluses to his patch, and therefore suspicious of the disease seed, Pa Akumasab left the room cursing, trotting forward in his heaving way, but amazingly agile for his bulk, and muttering 'you no go see me again for this place!' Without a

word he slouched into his seat and Tipoung'he had to hasten up for fear of being left behind. Pa Akumasab reversed with a wheezy crunch on the gravel and then without acknowledging the gateman's salute fired the car through the gate and onto the main road like a bullet, muttering to himself all the time but loud enough for Tipoung'he's pleasure. How could a foot-and-heel friend turn him down like this in his hour of need? Distraught, he recalled their palship since the Local Government School, Ibadan, after which they had parted ways when he left for Makerere. But they eventually caught up with each other on his return to the Re-unified country, quickly compensated for lost time, and were now honorary members of the CMA, each other's brother and keeper. All of a sudden, Pa Akumasab was lost in reminiscences of Ibadan and Makerere, meshed in resurrected strands of confession, heroism, and nostalgia as if Tipoung'he was the missing Wisemen. The places sounded strange and distant, but in Akumasab's invocations within which Tipoung'he was not to worry, and in fact shall bathe in the intellectual light one day if he did not involve himself with *njakiri* business in school, they also sent out an inviting beam. Tipoung'he's heart beat faster as he listened, and as the Peugeot tailed the erratic traffic and then swerved and turned all of a sudden and was ahead of one, two, even three cars at a go, he fancied distances that could not be measured and felt, hope that cupped hands could not contain. Honking cars in the on-coming traffic veered onto the narrow sidewalk and scattered sand grains against their chassis.

Pa Akumasab was still grumbling over his recent agitations and narrating the times that used to be good, when he swung the car into another schoolyard, abruptly cutting across the oncoming traffic. There was a screech of tyres and a blast of horns, but Pa Akumasab was now the big man of his status and imagination, one of the few in town. As they passed through the arched gate, Tipoung'he read the name of the school, *Kommerical Kollege of Teknology*.

As Pa Akumasab got out of the car a bulky man was walking toward a line of sheds around which students buzzed. Pa waved at the other man frantically and hopped toward him. Tipoung'he could not hear what they were saying but it soon became obvious to him that his man was losing his patience. He was caught between pacing and dancing at the same time, gesticulating for emphasis. Then

suddenly it ended. Pa Akumasab turned and Tipoung'he saw his face twisted into a frightful mask. He was sweating streams, and slumped into the car seat as if the seat was responsible for his frustration. He backed the car and waited for another car to drive out of the campus before following.

Only the booming music stood between the two of them. Tipoung'he was huddled in his own seat, almost afraid to breathe as Pa Akumasab cut across town, violating traffic ever so often, and rewarded for his skills with insults from taxi drivers.

'If your time for go don reach,' one of them shouted, pushing his head out of the window as Pa Akumasab was briefly squeezed-in by the mesh of cars at the road junction, 'make you go you one, Oga!'

Eventually the music was having an effect on Pa Akumasab's nerves. He was relaxed and even tapped his right thumb on the steering wheel, after the rhythm.

Then he branched off the main street again onto a granite track.

*Princely Commercial Academy*, the signboard read. The name was beautiful on Tipoung'he's tongue and he imagined men without voices, whose brains worked overtime. His sister had received a letter from a university in America that talked of 'the ideal quiet environment of the academy,' but she was still to make up her mind.

This time Pa Akumasab asked Tipoung'he to follow, and almost dragged him all the way. The school was another beehive; the students were on break, carrying small packages of *gâteau* and parched groundnuts and fruits. Tipoung'he wanted to turn and run but it was already too late. They sneaked among the students and through adjacent blocks to the back of the campus. He read the notices as they moved on. *Foncha Hall. Abidjo Foyer. Reunification Antechamber. Germaine Chambers*. There were long tables in the *Reunification Antechamber* lined with plates, spoons and forks and he thought of the Last Supper. In front of the other two halls he saw assorted washing spread out on lines, both male and female, the breeze blowing them over the flower beds.

They came to a small block squeezed into an angle of the campus and shaded by huge eucalyptus trees. One could touch the boundary barb wire without stretching the arm fully through the window. The first door they passed had a sign, *Bursar* written on a blue glass

plate. Pa Akumasab paused briefly on the second door on which Tipoung'he read *Manager*, and rasped on the door and roughly pushed it open.

The Manager was heavily built with eyes that could see through a mountain. They flashed at Pa Akumasab who had dropped his bulk into a seat without waiting for pleasantries and smiled; and then peered at Tipoung'he almost angrily, and he felt naked under scrutiny.

'I thought we settled this already, Joe,' the manager said, half smiling.

'What do you want me to do?' Pa snapped back; 'you can see it was not settled! You expect me to come crawling on my knees, begging you to allow your own son to study in your school? Then say so.'

He was angry and did not want to pretend otherwise. Tipoung'he felt as if he was on a hook, dangling over a pool of crocodiles.

The Manager wanted to say something but Pa Akumasab waved him down.

'No, listen to me first, Sheynfor. I understand when other places turn me down. But I don't understand when *you* turn your back on *him*. If he must go back to the village, you will be the one to take him to the park, and put him in a car, not me!'

Somewhere three pearls of a bell tolled off.

It was a final word and the Manager understood it. He was twisting a huge Parker pen in his fingers even after Pa Akumasab had spoken. Then he looked up and smiled.

'Okay Joe, I will not like to take him to the park,' he said.

He pressed a button on his table and a bell rang faintly in the other room. Almost immediately a slim young man appeared at the door.

'Yes, Sir,' he said.

'Please ask Mr Azoka to see me now.'

When Mr Azoka appeared at the door, he blocked the entrance with his size that was like that of Pa and the manager put together, and Tipoung'he shivered.

'Ah, Joe,' he said offering his hand to Pa Akumasab, 'you again!'

'Yes, and *here* again,' the Manager said, 'and will not leave until you relieve him of this young man.'

They all laughed, Pa Akumasab cautiously. He was still suspicious and his stiff face made him look remote.

‘Eei, *Chineke!*’ Mr Azoka exclaimed, turning to Tipoung’he and screening him with popped-out eyes, as if he were a latest miracle.

‘When was he weaned?’ and laughed in his throat. ‘I hope you’ll not be running away from school before we write down your name. Come,’ he said, and again dragged Tipoung’he out of the room without allowing for formal departure from Pa Akumasab. It was already a new world whose rules forbade familial sentimentality.

They walked along the corridors going by the classrooms where the students were already seated. Then they came to the end of a block and on the door was printed *Form One ‘A.’* Without knocking Mr Azoka opened the door and dragged Tipoung’he into the room. A hush fell over the room. The tutor who had been writing stopped and turned. Tipoung’he was about to pass out, blinded by the pair of staring eyes all focused on his heart. He felt the eyes burrowing into him like little darts seeking his heart. He was suddenly blind, could not feel his feet where he stood. A mist hung over his eyes and he saw nothing and heard nothing, only acted on instinct. His legs were weak and he felt the eyes crawling up and down his body, like leech on a cow’s testicles, peering at the wonder of his Christmas trouser of two shades of brown, one in front and the other behind, in the shapeless form of an elephant’s ears. It was cruel, the way they looked at him, scrutinising him like an unknown species of humanity. For a moment again, he felt the strong urge to flee from the circle of humiliation, but immediately knew his legs will not take him far.

‘*Monsieur* Poupa,’ Mr Azoka was saying, ‘one more child for you.’

The tutor came closer.

‘A real *bébé* too,’ he said, laying his clean hand on Tipoung’he’s shoulder. ‘*Mais,*’ he added, ‘iz not too late, Sir? This is *deuxième semestre* and I am giving test already!’

‘Well,’ Mr Azoka said in exasperation, ‘his father says it is not too late and threatens to kill himself if we say no, the young man says he doesn’t know, and I say I don’t know too. Good day, *Monsieur!*’

And he walked out and slammed the door after him.

'*Prends-place, jeune homme,*' the teacher said, guiding Tipoung'he with a slight push toward the nearest desk. Tipoung'he did not understand his words, but followed the gentle push on his back like his father's cows that knew from instinct when to rush to the stream and thereafter drop around him after having their fill and munching their guts before knuckling up again for the evening browse, homeward.

'*Bouger un peu, Sanga,*' Monsieur said to one of the two boys occupying the second desk of the middle row.

Tipoung'he sat down in his allocated space still suspended in the unreality of the moment against his brains and tried to focus on the rough top under his eyes, his own desk space on which he should write down his name as a college boy amongst the riotous evidence and ruin of his predecessors, soon to be envied by his friends in the village. For they must when he returned home on holiday, no longer rubbing himself against their running noses and over-night food habits. This was the break he had only dreamed of, with a fear in his heart; he could feel it now in the daze of images that sprang up before him, from the rough surface of the desk, covered with myriad scrawling. There were the names of people caught up in the names of others and of places and of things; sketches too, of animals, of houses, of humans, and of the globe such as the one Mr Ndipifon brought to school when he was in class seven. He could see the sun roughly rising from behind the stunted hills of Ndamnyeh, but night descends too suddenly and the moon takes over a little shy and hesitant, sending forth trails of light where secrets are meant to be sacred. He was after the secrets and felt the distance he had to walk echoing in his ears from the low humming of the students as they whispered and sighed over their papers, already forgetting him.

Tipoung'he stared at the blank piece of paper the boy called Sanga gave him and it confronted him like an omen. He knew how to say *good morning* and *yes* and *no* and *thank you* in heavy French, but not much else beyond rascally distortions which they had scandalised from their sisters. And now he was expected to write!

'Sanga,' he heard Mbouju's voice from behind the room, a low whisper, 'that na my *perriy frère*, ok!'

It was a warning reminder and not an introductory remark.

'So what?' someone challenged.

'Tipoung'he's heart sank. He understood the implications of the exchanges and knew what that could easily lead to. Had he not missed out on college initially because of low whispers in the hall in which the weak pupils had been favoured exaggeratedly? 'List B' pass but failed became the refrain in his mind that refused clemency for his teachers who had caused so much pain in his heart, and instead of the College of Science and Technology in Ala'mbeliy, which he had preferred, he now found himself in the Academy with another uncertain future from whispers and threats.

He stared at the paper again and fought with himself. Sanga felt an instant liking for the newcomer and exposed part of his work to 'Tipoung'he, but he instead laid down his pen and stared vacantly ahead. In his fear, he suddenly found inexplicable courage. He was aware of the tutor pacing up and down the hall, glancing into students' work and making a guiding remark where necessary. Somehow, 'Tipoung'he felt, *Monsieur* would understand his plight, that he was not prepared to sow where he did not plough. He did not know what would follow, and awaited it with a casual inevitability that was already stiffening his soul. He knew Mbouju was behind him, but would have been more comfortable if Anderiya were there too. He felt the urge to turn his head and look, but was not yet ready to confront the stares that seemed to have carved out their territory and saw his entry as a violation. He felt the tension in the very air around his nape, and wherever Anderiya was, he would find out with time. Even as he thought of his fate, 'Tipoung'he heard two girls outside singing freely in French as if to boost his confidence.

*Alouette, gentil alouette,  
Alouette je te plumerais...*

\*\*\*\*

They had just finished the evening meal of jelloff rice and his sisters were discussing their day's here-and-there with this-and-that, gossiping. That was what their father said, that women do nothing but gossip, and so had decreed against any form of contact between his sons and the women, whether it was sitting with them in the



evenings or accompanying them to the farm. Special amendments had to be implemented before they could even clear their mother's farms after she returned to the village. Metsi was talking about a student nurse on internship who mistakenly put five packets of drugs in her bag.

'Mistake?' Wondon asked in horror, 'I don't get it.'

'Well, that's what the Chief said and no one contradicts him.'

'Then that was a criminal mistake?' Wondon was twisting her nose as if the mistake emitted a repulsive odour.

Tipoung'he was curled up in a cushion chair, lost in the pages of his thriller and followed the girls only unconsciously. He was in a world of fast-moving heroes who did not know the difference between life and death and were too impatient to be bothered. His palms became clammy as he read, feeling the heartbeat rise rapidly as the events gathered pace and anticipated the Executioner's next move against the police and the rich. It was like he knew every street of Paradise City and Mr Toholo was his secret totem.

There was a knock on the door and it creaked open even before Metsi could start her usual recital of *address in full, come in if you're well dressed*. It was Freddy who jumped into the room and swept his eyes over the place like police detective Tom Lepski. Often he would not greet, but merely slip into familiarities, already a member of the house. But he exchanged a few words with Metsi before vomiting his anger to Wondon about returning from Victoria without salt, and it was already month end.

'The coast is really dull,' he explained.

But Tipoung'he's pose distracted him.

'Always with your book, eh, young Aristotle!' and Freddy patted him on the shoulder.

Tipoung'he looked up and smiled; but he was angry at the intrusion, dragged away from the peak of anticipation when the Indian recalled his church-going days and how like the Priest's narration of Christ's betrayal he too was being betrayed by a handkerchief-kiss. Tipoung'he was stooping back to his opened pages when he heard Freddy suddenly catch his breath in a strangled whistle and at the same time swept the book from under Tipoung'he's eyes.

'Jesus wept!' he cried, and his cat eyes rolled in a funny convulsive blink; 'why do you allow this child to read stuff like this?'

'What's it?' Wondon asked with a shrug. She was of the liberal opinion that what was good for the goose may even be better for the garner. Why cast dragnets over the mind when the mind itself was always changing in shape?

For an answer Freddy displayed the cover page for her to see.

'Wanna Stay Alive,' she read with a deliberate corruption. 'O,' she said, 'he reads what pleases him and claims it helps his English, and then it doesn't bite. I'll only wear one pair of trousers with him if he doesn't hit the mark in school.'

That was just like his sister, and Tipoung'he smiled; she was always the way out and saw no reason whatsoever, why locks should ever have been manufactured. To her the locksmith was the greatest criminal in society.

'But he must not read it!' Freddy exclaimed passionately, like his father, Tipoung'he thought.

'Is it a bad book?' Metsi asked with ironic innocence. She was more concerned with terminology that would break down every component of aspirin and nivaquine for her without the nagging insolence of his boss who claimed to know everything in the book about these drugs although his wife nearly miscarried from an overdose which he administered at home.

Tipoung'he was frowning in spite of himself, awaiting the verdict.

'Bad!' Freddy exclaimed. 'It is disgustingly criminal. And you only in form one.'

His eyes jabbed into Tipoung'he in an unfriendly way.

'You rascal,' they seemed to say.

'I find nothing wrong in the series,' his sister said.

'Sure you don't, after all you buy them!' Freddy stared in disbelief. Then he pulled a chair and sat down facing Tipoung'he.

*What now,* the boy thought.

'I tell you what,' he said, 'you just have to be careful what you read, okay? You may soon get yourself into trouble if you don't discriminate.'

But Tipoung'he was lost again with discriminating. Was it not a bad act, in fact evil, to do so? Their moral instructor who charmed the students every Friday afternoon from their various denominations with an angelic voice with guitar always used the word as contrast to brotherhood.

‘Our brothers in South Africa,’ he cried, ‘being discriminated against in their own land and turned into beggars too.’

Then he went on with so many and-so-on-and-so-forths, his voice shivering with emotion, before fitting the central phrase of the sermon about the brotherhood of the Blackman which was at stake.

‘It is now or never, that we make or mar in brotherhood against the breeders of segregation.’

The students listened, united in the recognition of brotherly suffering. At such moments the hall became a piece of silence through which the preacher’s voice reverberated, gradually rising to a pitch when suddenly it collapsed in a trembling falsetto, having shredded the obnoxious word out of their pious hearts of brotherhood.

And now Freddy was inviting him to gather the bits of the word together, and frame it against what he liked.

‘Anyway,’ he was saying, ‘if you must read all you like, never open the page of a book called *Girls and War*. Do you get that?’

Tipoung’he nodded dumbly, suddenly scared without knowing why. And as if seeing through his mind, Freddy added, ‘it’s a very bad book, too devilish, totally disgusting. I could not muster the courage to finish it.’

Tipoung’he went to bed with totally disgusting and devilish thoughts splitting his brains and at the same time tried to understand how such thoughts looked like and felt. By the time Mbouju returned at past midnight he was still staring into the darkness, wondering.

The following morning in school, while the Accounts teacher was tracing lines on the board, backing the class, Tipoung’he whispered the title to Sigoh.

‘What?’ the other hissed.

He barely whispered but it was not low enough to escape the rabbit ears of ‘Steno’ as they called the teacher, who could switch from Accounts to Short Hand and then Typing lessons by the time a man blinked. He picked up the whisper and promptly turned round and stared in their direction, fire in his eyes. But the culprits had bowed back over their ledgers. Tipoung’he then wrote the title on a piece of paper and passed it to him through Cyprian and then Vicky to his right. A short while after the reply came, a telegram as Mr Azoka who turned out to be their Commerce tutor would have called it.

Tipoung'he read it at a glance: 'Library. Break time. Beware red skin joe.'

He smiled and slipped the paper into his pocket.

Steno continued to drag out his lines, scribbled the figures into the spaces and then totalled up and ended with a double line below the net like a victory mark. And he talked too while he drew the vertical and then horizontal lines, talking all the time to the blackboard like a parrot as the chalk trailed the huge blackboard ruler and his little buttocks turned according to the direction of his legs, the angle of his knees, and the distance between them, ludicrous manoeuvres of an *assiko* dancer, while the white goat droppings issued from the tip of the chalk.

Tipoung'he strained to catch up, but the more he struggled the more mistakes he made. He was not interested and only went along to avoid a confrontation with the iron ruler against his finger knuckles. He had never loved figures and called them dry season kernels which one of their friends brought from Weybukari and he tried one and gave up.

During break he was scared of the big boys in the library. The longish rectangular room with its attached book store looked strange, behind their class, and he often observed the senior students go in and out hugging huge books to their chests and walking with slow majestic steps. Tipoung'he envied them and wondered how it would feel to be in form four or five and then walk in their ranks, into the library, grab a book and read and understand everything in it. People on the move, he thought, recalling the cover of his history text, and thinking may be that was the meaning of moving from form one to five. He watched them still through the broken glasses of the netted windows on the back wall through which the truant boys could not jump, and saw their concentrated pride marked out by the lines of the window protector. He was trying to look at them through the little squares of the protector grill, to fit each face into a square but it was not possible. So he saw them instead through the stained and broken glasses without seeing the netting, blurred like shadows, walking like princes and princesses or bent over their books or just conversing. Those last were idle minds, he thought, picking one of Sterno's phrases, ready for the devil's constructed castle.

But Sigoh feared nobody and twisted his head this way and that in quick gestures of naughty arrogance. He knew most of the seniors in the dormitory and had queer names for each of them like Atoucassé or Mongo Park or Ekouta Tiflas. But it was Red Skin Joe who was the most dreaded, even by some of the tutors and most of his peers. In addressing the morning assembly and performing big-man gestures and ‘castigating’ the whole place, the word soon filtered through the various class rows as if they were all condemned to a colossal castigation, and R.S.J. always came around to a habitual interjection, ‘I wou’rnt mind that,’ whatever it was that someone thought about his ability as senior prefect. As they returned to their respective classes they also repeated the catchphrases that fattened their vocab that morning, piqued though by the sense of doom in anticipation of the moment when Red Skin Joe would walk into their class, tutor or no tutor in session, and breath his ‘hole-of-a-place’ testaments against the school. But Sigoh refused to be counted amongst the cowardly lot; he would sneer at them, pretend to be blind to Red Skin Joe’s towering stare, and dash away from a furious grasp, and fly off laughing his broken laugh of mockery. ‘Red Skin Joe’ became the symbol of interfering authority to him. No one dared to touch him too because it was his father’s school. That was what Sigoh had told Tipoung’he although Cyprian called him a liar. But it didn’t bother Sigoh. He went about his business the way he wished and no one dared to lay a finger on his head. So he walked up to the counter in the library and stood on his toes to talk to the librarian.

‘I want a book,’ he said.

‘Wha’?’ the librarian said, leaning forward and cocking his head.

‘A book!’ Sigoh repeated jumping in agitation.

‘Wha’ ... wha’ book?’ he stammered.

*‘Girls and War.’*

‘Get out of here, nuisance!’ a boy barked from behind them, ‘that’s not for your class,’ and Tipoung’he who had almost been pushing Sigoh up the formica-sealed side of the table, swung around ready to collapse.

But Sigoh ignored the senior student. One glance was enough to forget the assertive face, which in normal times Sigoh would deride as suffering from a lack of home training and they would all cue in laughing. He turned back to the librarian and mumbled something.

'You heard ... wha' the social pre... prefect say,' the other shouted with a struggle, suddenly empowered.

But Sigoh started making funny cat-sounds, clawing at the table and dragged himself along its surface and his feet roughly on the floor.

'I want the book,' he moaned.

The librarian turned to the prefect, but he was talking with some girls and had lost interest in them. The old man shrugged, put on his thick glasses, and seemed to glue his face to the shelves, checking out the title with his finger.

At last he spotted it.

'Ah, here,' he said, pulling it out. 'Now, listen to me. Today i' Tu ... Tu'day; I wan' i' back on Fraday morn' unfailin.' Tha' right?'

'Sure, Ni,' Sigoh replied with a foolish grin on his face, and snatched the book and the two turned and disappeared. Tipoung'he was to read first since he lived off campus. That way it did not matter for how long Sigoh kept it thereafter. He could always fetch it from his box when Ni became really unbearable, refusing to listen to Sigoh's habitual flattery, 'You bi my own man, na!'

But Tipoung'he was disappointed with the book. It was made up of stories and naturally he went for the title story, which he read without a pounding heart and sweaty palms. There was talk of a war and then the girls just moved about and met and talked with men. There was nothing exciting. He knew Sigoh was not going to read it immediately he learned that no one was being chased in it.

Like the rest of the students Tipoung'he kept a 'jotter' and in the last two pages he like Sigoh entered big, beautiful words and phrases from the novels they read. At times they wrote out whole sentences from the thrillers. One of Tipoung'he's favourites was Becky Thatcher's words that lulled Tom to sleep, 'how could you be such a noble boy, Tom?' Tipoung'he read the passage repeatedly and that in the cave too, and agreed with Sigoh that when they reach form five they should write a beautiful novel like that. Tipoung'he was to be Huck and Sigoh, Tom, although they had a problem selecting Becky Thatcher because they were too many to choose from. For the moment, Vicky and Aita were top on their list, and they were sure to find a cave with many rooms below Station Cliff. They were children of the jungle, and their blood responded

to the calling from the pages. Some of the words from the novels often slipped onto their tongues and they began to talk like the senior boys, acting truancy. Sigoh would throw his head to one side and then fire the word if they were near from five students and as the seniors stared the two walked away flashing Tom-Huck mischief.

On Friday Tipoung'he forgot to take the book to school. So they agreed to skip the wire and go for it during break. It was more to have their adventure than fear that Ni would ask for it. Just before the final bell however, Sammy the labour prefect suddenly materialised in front of the class and almost immediately started shouted at them.

'You foxes!' he screamed, 'what do you think you are! On your knees!'

But he had not even given them the chance to stand up. There was a confused stampede as the students crumbled on their knees, humbled by humiliation.

'I think it were time your tails were snapped off,' Sammy threatened. He repeated that threat every time he was furious with them.

'Eh-eh, Sammy,' Deboh piped from the back, 'you too!' She was one of his girls and it was no secret that during outings when Sammy visited them her mother showed her appreciation by stuffing him with beans and *macra*.

'Spineless cockroaches!' Sammy spat, not listening. 'You dare defy my presence and authority?'

'Forgive them na, Sammy,' Deboh said in a dolling voice, mocking. Everybody knew that she was thrilled at the spectacle. That was how she managed her revenge and counted her blessings. Sammy too knew she was only urging him to go on; it was what she prayed for every morning before leaving home and every night before falling asleep, to avenge her mental weaknesses on those who then made her life in the school a misery, as if she chose to put on her folds of flesh into which it was rumoured Sammy disappeared quite often like the little sailor boy or the man from Nineveh. She was Sammy's bride, so what, and now they would learn to see her as their saviour. Were it not for her money and the secret gestures she made at the bigger boys in class, she would have long run away to be with her mother in her roadside stall.

'Why you dey trouble them so na, Sammy?' she sang from her room-corner battlements, and dragged out his name like a catapult against the kneeling culprits, and Tipoung'he could feel her fatty folds trembling around her neck and under her ears and second chin as she turned her neck as if shy, talking in her sleepy Mammy-Water voice. That was what Cyprian described her, a temptress because she painted her eyes like the witch in an Indian movie, flying on a mat with her flowing hair of little snakes. So they started calling her Mama Indiana.

Sammy stared at the humbled class and turned round majestically, walking up and down the spaces and kicked out savagely whenever he felt like it.

'The next time you wag your tails against my collective punishment,' he said, 'then you'll only have yourselves to blame.'

Although the discipline master had understood their justification for not coming out on time during labour, since their tutor was collecting his test scripts, Sammy silently vowed to give them a drop of his piss.

The bell rang and Sammy must go for his lunch. But the class was to continue in the same subdued position until Judgement Day.

He was hardly out of the room when one of those big words skipped out of Tipoung'he's lips.

'Sonofa...'

Sanga clamped a hand over Tipoung'he's mouth just as the door opened again and Sammy once more imposed himself at akimbo, a wicked look in his eyes ready to crucify the whole class with one nail from his pupil. His nose was wrinkled, his nostrils flared in their distortion and his upper lip trembled.

'Who opened *that* trap?' He cringed a little as he pronounced 'that.'

The room was stiff with silence.

'Who, or are you deaf?'

And he advanced a few steps, surveying the class with a slow movement of his head.

'Wey, Sammy, na just play na, eh-eh, you too!' Mama Indianna said.

But Sammy was not to be cajoled. He started calling out notorious names.



‘Nkembey ... Asapifor ... Mbujou ... Chiy ...’ and they stood up, one after the other in silence.

‘Who said what, cowards, answer me!’

But there was no answer.

‘Now you want me to be nasty, okay?’

‘Na only small pickin na, Sammy ... wey!’ Indiana said suddenly alarmed. She who had been with Sammy and watched him go nasty in a terrible frenzy of inchoate affirmations against the godforsaken humanity being bred in the institution, trembled for the worst. ‘Why you dey worry na?’

But Sammy meant business. His eyes were screwed up into tiny pebbles that peered into every face with the professed power to divine the guilty student.

‘Who said “Son of a bitch”?’ he said deliberately.

‘No Sir,’ Tipoung’he stammered, ‘I didn’t say that...’

Sammy spun round on his *semelle cuir* heels with iron studs for dramatic cracklings, crushing concrete. He had advanced into the middle of the class, sniffing loudly, but was shocked to see the squirrel face peering at him and ready to faint.

‘You rat, you mongrel rat of extinct species, you *knifongol*!’ Sammy spat out and pounced on Tipoung’he’s collar with nicotine-smelling claws.

‘So I’m your sonofabitch, right?’ He said slowly, and stared at Tipoung’he’s sorry face with an exterminating squint.

Tipoung’he felt as if his knees were filled with water. He trembled visibly as Sammy took a closer look at his face.

‘You native and despicable midget! Come out before I dismantle you out of existence,’ and savagely pulled the criminal from between Cyprian and Vicky.

‘And now, crime number two,’ Sammy proclaimed, pulling at Tipoung’he’s shirt, ‘you have not fastened you hairy tail.’

Tipoung’he fumbled with his shirt but because his hands were shaking he could not properly tuck it in. A low ripple went through the class of a pitiful humour.

‘So your mother or whoever,’ Sammy went on more composed now, ‘asked you to call me a son-of-a-bitch!’

‘No Sir,’ Tipoung’he protested, ‘I didn’t say so.’

‘Now crime number three,’ Sammy said and stepped back, and feeling mightier than God, Tipoung’he thought. ‘Now you declare me a liar?’

‘No... no Sir...I...’

Useless protest, Tipoung’he knew, even as the words fell from his lips. He had been told a story of how the previous term Cyprian had been skewered by Sammy’s tongue for asking ‘a simple question.’ Their Arithmetic tutor was sick and the Administration asked Sammy who happened to be the best hope for the school’s RSA credentials to fill in the gap. The students had been informed and after break had been waiting for Sammy. As they became noisy, Cyprian had asked no one in particular, ‘Where that Sammy, na?’ At that very moment Sammy was passing by the window and caught the snarling waves of Cyprian’s voice.

‘Who made that statement?’ he cried. At that time the class policy of ‘no-tell-cos-I-equal-us-and-us-I’ had just been adopted and Sammy’s fury was exacerbated by the silent affront to his authority. A stonewall against his wrinkled forehead, bashed to no avail. At last, in order to spare the rest unjust pain and at the same time maintain their solidarity, Cyprian stood up.

‘I see,’ Sammy said thoughtfully, a jubilant glee in his eyes, ‘so what else did you, your mother and many fathers, and your brothers and sisters discuss about me today?’

His biceps bulged against his chest and he contemplated the boy with a devastating glare.

‘*That* Sammy,’ he continued and visibly wriggled in pain as if his heart were squeezed in pronouncing the determiner with which his name became, inevitably, the commonest noun. That was beyond pardon, he declared, dragging the phrase from somewhere, and riffs whose names were still written only in dust for fear they may smear the school’s records, must not be allowed scot-free. This triggered a laugh from one of the back-benchers, on whom Sammy immediately swooped.

‘You think that’s funny, right?’ He was breathing heavily now. ‘Let me tell you, now that you’re selling your broken pieces of zinc to me. By the time I finish buying them you’ll refuse to accept the money!’

The class could contain itself no more, and burst out in euphoric praise songs to Sammy's eloquence, shouting 'Sammy, Sammy!' He staggered under the sudden glorification and his frozen heart thawed a bit, and surrendered to a momentary flirting with the stray emotion, but not before Cypian was dragged to the front to pick an invisible needle while standing on his right unbending leg with the other, like his left hand reaching out to stab the ceiling, stretched to full length behind.

'Four points of the wind vane,' Tipoung'he had said when told the story, 'with your head pointing north.'

Panting now in Sammy's clutches he wondered if he was to be the newest wind vane.

'Then what?' Sammy barked and cut off his trembling voice.

'That's not what I wanted to say... I...' he stammered off.

'Speak out you Lilliputian!'

'Sir, I wanted ... to say... son ... of ... God.'

The class burst out laughing as if they had been waiting for the answer. But they stopped almost immediately under Sammy's stern look. He had already been summoned by the Administration to explain his actions in discouraging students from attending Moral Instructions, and his unapologetic submission that 'it was absolutely criminal for the students to sacrifice their scarce resources to undeserving fishers of money, given the rate at which cost of living was displacing the balance between demand and supply, and so the more reason why opportunity cost must be a crucial consideration in everyone's list,' and so on, until he left the entire DisComm, with the exception of the Economics tutor, speechless. There was nothing for them to say against such unrepentant boldness but to let him off the hook, since as a matter of fact, if truth must be told, the Principal later confessed, he spoke well of the institution.

So to conceive of Sammy as son of God! Even his looks as he swept his eyes over the class at that moment, conjuring blisters on ever beholden hearts, would activate the anti-intrusion alarm fitted to the gates of heaven.

Tipoung'he noticed that the windows were crowded with students and his misery was beyond words, more than tongue can tell, as Taanah would say.

‘Intelligent boy, right?’ Sammy said. ‘I’ll make an example of you, follow me.’

As they walked across the lawn and then behind the dormitories, Tipoung<sup>he</sup> wondered what would have been the outcome if he had instead pleaded on the force of an incomplete sentence. He remembered their English teacher in his white immaculate gowns laying ‘special emphases’ on the significance of the full stop.

‘Never ignore it, my dear boys and girls. It is a phenomenon that may take you to the gallows or earn you redemption if properly applied.’ Then he told them of the Englishman whose examiners had been shocked to read the statement at the end of his essay: ‘God should kill the Queen.’ Treason, they chanted in a patriotic chorus, and vowed how they could smell it a million miles away. ‘To the Old Bailiff and be hanged until he is dead,’ they cried. ‘Ma’am exposed to the perils of some lurking Robin Hood scoundrel, God save the Queen!’ But Her Majesty’s Council for the defence joggled for position in a land of Law where the burden of prove was not with the accused, say all you know in the book, with all the evidence that the Sheriff of Nottingham could cook up, and at last the pathetic boy was offered a life line to tell the Court why he must be spared the rope.

‘My Lord,’ he piped out, ‘it was an incomplete sentence.’

‘What!’ the Prosecution hangman jumped to his feet, and pointed to evidence number God alone knows what in the records, written and acknowledged as such in the accused’s own hand, in black and white, what else!

‘No doubt, no doubt at all,’ the equivocal Judge said, ‘but please hear the boy out, will you?’

The deflated persecutor clung to his heavy robes for balance as the boy, summoned to, completed the sentence.

‘My Lord, Sir, time cut me short and I had to hand in my script, otherwise, the sentence would have read, “God should kill the Queen’s enemies,” full stop.’

‘Total confusion amongst Her Majesty’s enthusiastic saviours, my boys and girls,’ Mr Nforyim concluded, reclined in his masterly pose to watch the relief on the students’ faces, putting a hilarious full stop too to his lesson for the day.

But not so for Tipoung'he today; he knew already what fate awaited him as he trudged after Sammy; the dry eucalyptus stumps behind the kitchen, reserved for the hardened criminals although it was obvious too that he would never get a chip out of the knotty trunks, even if he were to spend a whole day at it. They passed in front of the kitchen and for a brief moment a whiff of fried fish still sizzling in the large pan caught him almost off guard. Sammy surveyed the logs waiting in immemorial despondency and then looked at the miserable wretch besides him and seemed to be in a crisis with himself. Then he moved off without a word, back toward the kitchen and Tipoung'he after him like a reluctant shadow.

There was a twisted iron bucket outside the kitchen lying on its side. Sammy kicked it upright, and then asked for a table spoon from one of the cooks.

'Now you sonofabitch,' he said to Tipoung'he, 'fill it to the brim from the kitchen tap with this container.' He pushed the spoon into Tipoung'he's hands who could only think of his break, already ruined.

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It was the first day of school, and the desire to recount holiday stories overwhelmed the excitement of the new class. The movement into a new class based on the pass grade saw Tipoung'he in 'Two A' with other students who carried ostentatious looks in their eyes until those who had barely survived dismissal found themselves in a 'D' class confederacy. The design separated and brought friends together and Tipoung'he knew he would be sneaking into the other classes to see some of his mates. The water tank that supplied the nurses' quarter had disappeared and a new building stood in its place in creamy beauty and skirted in light blue. It was extended onto the Form Five block so that a huge corridor that easily swallowed the new school bus formed the passage into the campus directly from the gate. The administrative offices had been moved to the front, into the new building and the doors opened onto the corridor. Everybody said Mr Mbaya would now watch over the school like a jealous dragon, missing out on nothing. But Sigoh dragged Tipoung'he away from the chatting group and they moved toward the new offices.

'See,' he said, pointing at one of the doors.

'What's it?' Tipoung'he said.

'Read that out aloud, then you get a meat-roll during break.'

Sigoh never made a challenge he was not sure to win.

'Can you?' Tipoung'he challenged Sigoh.

'No, but may be yes, just may be.'

That meant he too was not sure. Tipoung'he looked at the words that stood out as if walking in familiar boldness and cut out in black on a plaque of white. It was a strange word and he tried to form a sound by working his jaws and lips awkwardly. He tried to take out the letters one at a time; 'A-R-C-H-I-V-E-S' and then blocked them in pronunciation, as Mr Mforyim had taught them, 'ARCH' and then 'HIVES' and Sigoh started to laughter. They tried to pronounce the first part, not knowing what it meant although it looked familiar. Tipoung'he's mind reeled backward, and even as he stood there splitting the words and patching them together again, he saw his aunt running after him all over the Ntoh playground, pleading and flattering him, against the hooting sounds of *Missongfishiy*. A sensation of fear crawled over him like a millipede, as he imagined how the blurred eyes of the judges would have peered into the midst of black gowns drooping in alleluia bars, to see the baby Christ crying like a forsaken soul. He was to be baby Christ at the first moments of birth, crying as he was soon to forgive. His aunt promised him two tins of *mai-mai* with an extra 10 francs, moaning how he could do this to her, the leader. He had done it before on Christmas Eve, but then it was dark and the dull rays from the tilly instead gave him the confidence of anonymity. And he knew the people, clustered in their small hilly quarter, whispering his name. They had watched the rehearsals in which he participated reluctantly, shy, and agreed that he was really baby Jesus. But in the vast arena of the *Missongfishiy*, he was lost amongst strangers, and barely recognised his own people. His aunt will not hear any of it and was ready to add his gifts. But he stumbled in his response and in a flash he dashed off, away from her cuddling arms smelling of Vaseline, cut across the small handball field and ran toward the Devotion building near the cemetery. Other groups were busy in their preparation, arranging their own gowns of different colours, and tuning their instruments. Then he noticed little placards roughly

cut out and pinned in front of each group. He tried to read, forming the words on his tongue slowly, as his English teacher had taught them. He recognised a few of the initial words on each placard, like 'Ntoh' because that was where they came to school, and 'Kongmben' his own quarter. He could even spell Kongmben with closed eyes, after spelling it many times in the letters he wrote for his father to send to his sisters in college. But the following word that appeared on all the placards was like cracking kernels with his teeth, whenever he attempted pronouncing it: 'CHOIR.' He rolled it on other words with familiar letters like 'chew' and 'choice' and 'church,' and ended up convincing himself with a sound that meant nothing to him. But it was a beautiful sound, the way he tried to pronounce it, a mixture of 'choice' and 'chair' in that order and wondered if it was the opposite of one of these. Suddenly remembering his aunt and suspecting that she might have crept up behind him, he again flew off ignorantly happy.

But he had forgotten about the word until today as he watched Sigoh's lunch bait dangle before his tired eyes. He will only end up humiliating himself if he tried and while listening to the other boys who had also been recruited on the meat-roll bait, he turned and saw one of the builders mount a ladder over the cypress hedge with barbed wire strung through it, and across which he could see the nurses in their white and blue frocks and neatly made head caps, pulling trolleys along the tiled corridors. He shuddered, feeling a heavy disgust for the medicine they offered, but admiring the little tidy steps that dragged along the corridor, Florence Nightingale, the Lady with the lamp, after their decked trolley. He wished he was never going to be ill before dying because his father had said good people never fall sick before death. They simply die. And his grandmother had visited them and said that in their family they never die; they simply fly away, and no one ever knew when this was to happen. Then he recalled the heavy afternoon when his brother had died and wondered if his tiny cries could have been a form of illness. Their mother had come to the village to have the baby and barely two weeks after birth, and he the jubilant big brother, just beginning to anoint himself every night in the ceremonial palm oil of *ipvouré*, the extensive baby-shower that lasted for weeks and then months, as the women came and went in categories of *co-wives*,

maternal aunts, paternal aunts, age mates, and friends, and at the end of which the man wished he were somewhere else, away from the oil-drinking and meat-swallowing lot. To mash their roast cocoyam or plantain in oil until it dripped between their fingers was a privilege the women were not ready to surrender, and awaited marriage and then successive births with a nourishing vengeance against masculine arrogance. But it was not to be, for Tipoung'he, the ritual of celebration, for the tiny legs could not kick out for long, and the voice, tiny too and stringent, was giving up, unknown to him and his mother, the two of them alone with the baby during the farming season, because the blood would not stop to trickle from the red tip of his stolen god, and soaked his neatly folded napkins one after another, until his mother grew hoarse from invoking the spirits of her ancestors in words that made no sense to him. He looked on, and the face of the baby became white gradually and he did not understand the long sigh of a stabbing grief that his mother uttered, shouting without any sound, and his heart heavy from his mother's misery. Then she passed her hand gently over the baby's eyes and sat there tight-lipped, choked, just before the people started returning from the farms. Their greetings, how-was-he, while lowering their baskets to the knee and then with a desperate gasp to the floor, or simply tilting the head to one side to relieve themselves of the log of wood, froze on their lips as his mother stared back at them with a look of woe. Her sore whimpers, like red coals, were to burn on his memory for ever. How she talked to no one all afternoon, but talked still as if someone were there listening to her; and how she begged and cried for the dying child whom they barely knew; how the wound bled still ever since the old man left with his blades neatly wrapped in black polythene and stuffed into his raffia bag; and how the face of his brother dying, became white, the little lips pursed in pain and exhausted. And the afternoon dragged on with the heaviness of death that hung in the air and was never to leave him, and their father had sent him to go and inform the family members. He remembered coming back to see the small bamboo coffin cushioned with the wrapper that his father had bought for his mother that Christmas. They had to wait until the following morning to bury him since his mother's father had twisted his ankle and could not travel at night. In the pale light of the lamp, Tipoung'he stole into the shadows because they would



not allow him and the other children see the dead baby, and looked at the calm face as if sleeping, so calm and undisturbed, his lips slightly apart. He was like the only brother Tipoung'he ever had, the others were just *there*, different shades of the personality that never was. Preacher Godlove had been called and he came in the morning with his bible and bowed his head and others too drooped theirs, and said 'we loved him but the father loved him even more.' Tipoung'he wanted to ask his mother which father he was talking about, but one look at her miserable face was enough for him to be quiet. But what did preacher Godlove know about the love between brothers that was so powerful it resided where only memory could drag it out finally. Without knowing why, Tipoung'he had resented the humility and stood isolated, until his aunt, discovering him in the shadows, quickly dragged him away by the hand to her house where he was going to stay for the duration of the funeral. But the men had put their heads together, although Tipoung'he did not see them do this, and decided that there was to be no funeral. The baby was called Christopher, because his uncle who bought the name from his father said the boy shall go to places unknown to any man.

Tipoung'he blinked and again looked across the yard now distanced by his thoughts, and saw the nurses between the spaces of the hedge push their trolleys by the handle, little white handles like the ones in Aghem, that also looked like the cords by which the coffin had been lowered. But Sigoh was calling, it was break over.

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The assembly ground was plaited in habitual rows of charcoal grey and white, red and white, two rows for each class of boys and girls, roughly according to height. The various prefects took turns to make one or two announcements briefly, but mostly to show off, except for Sammy who as usual hunched his shoulders and glared in the direction of the cat calls.

'Toothless bulldogs,' he exclaimed, 'let me spot just one coward and skin him alive!'

Then the Information Prefect mounted the steps of the flagpole with a characteristically unhurried gait. The whistling intensified in anticipation but his face was a rare mask. Usually he would smile, and then fake seriousness at once, twisting his mouth awkwardly in

a confusion whether to smile or be serious, flirting with the students. After all, he had his 'Paper' that was posted every Monday although he preferred the word 'published.'

'This week's publication,' he would call out, 'is just exquisite pepper-soup which you can't afford not to sip!'

And the students consumed his menu free of charge during the course of the week, milling around the Information Board, their eyes darting up and down and across the pages to peep at their favourite columns, neatly laid out on double-spread ledger pages, and expected to forward their 'unsolicited comments' to the Editor-in-Chief himself. He had his 'office' *behind* the librarian's desk and would fidget there, with his hand-picked 'Assistants,' shuffling papers and cursing, scribbling out the next 'issue' of *L'Ami du Peuple* in his neat, cursive hand with variations that were highlighted in different colours and cases. The following Monday at lunch time the students would crowd the notice board area, to read and find out if their comments featured.

The college authorities had had a showdown with the 'Paper' and vowed to silence *L'Ami* come rain or thunder, and the Editor-in-Chief vowed that was never going to happen as long as ink flowed in his pen. In one of its editorials, 'the gist of the pepper-soup' declared as the revamped mission of *L'Ami* 'a crusade to deliberately flush out mediocrity from the administrative ranks, in the solemn hope of restoring dignity in word and in deed to the Institution as was worthy of any Garden of academic excellence.' Otherwise, the write-up continued, 'how could we ever hope to show the professed light so that humanity would follow?'

The Principal, after eavesdropping on students discussing the challenge, had requested a translation from his secretary, which she managed to render in pidgin.

'Ahaa!' he said, 'I know that too much *liberté* I give them has come to this!' He felt targeted and stammered in his vulnerability as he tried to patch pieces of English into commendable phrases. How could they be so ungrateful toward his tolerance, fatherliness, understanding, and even friendship? He should have been suspicious of the nefarious intents behind the 'Paper's' title, sneaky attributes of evil. His mind raged over emotions which his lips would not express in Shakespeare's tongue, so he wanted to smash his head

against the wall and expire in a spasm of scandalous French epithets exposing the unholy revolutionary. A history major from LeClerc, Monsieur Tipcheu Bonaventure Jean-Bosco had crept from Penka Michel to Paris and crawled into and out of 'Paris I' through the backdoor, and clung to a piece of paper on which the little prints acknowledged his diluted strategising into the shady corners of French history, if only to ensure the required credits for his adventure as a dabbler in *Sciences Juridiques et Politiques* with special focus on *L'Administration Civil*. In the late sixties of Jean-Bosco's sojourn, Paris was a shadowy rough and tumbling playground for the new African who perhaps found freedom too much of a cup to tackle in one gulp, what with the money coming in from home, bit by bit from retailed sweat, to pay for the broken bottle of photosynthesis in a French lab, only for the blonde temptresses to milk his manhood from its ancestral gourd and leave him, on the eve of graduation, nose-diving for strands. And caught in the few-nights-and-days fantasy of *Omnia vincit Amor* and yet dreaming of total liberation and independence for his eternally suffering people from the warm laps of a French girl, Jean-Bosco and his brother-hudlums became stray bullets against their own dreams, thrown out of the midnight pubs and staggering home with the veteran's anthem as compass. 'Home again, again' they sang without a clue to the distance between their dangling horizon and the native land, inviting curses that rained on them from half-open windows above and a few motorists. The Negro who escaped Jim Crow's America and scratched meanings from the cultural miasma of a Parisian once-upon-a-time, looked at the Africans and wondered if there was a different definition of identity from that which had been handed down to him from the cotton fields in the South, while the African, shocked by undue scrutiny, looked at him and thought, O, *mon semblable, mon frère*, what a waste!

Without protocol of departure, Jean-Bosco's nose-dive miraculously landed him on the fetid banks of the Wouri from which slough he had emerged after months of ship-hiking, to start puffing *je reviens de Paris* inanities, with a heavy folder of diplomas to show, to anxious sole proprietors who were only too eager to stem the tide of wearying home-grown talents. With his luck running out faster than his ever protruding stomach could tolerate, Jean-Bosco

nose-dived ahead of his luck and this time woke up in Bamenda and started to brandish his credentials for an administrative portfolio. When the doors of the Academy opened to him, he wondered if his ancestors had ever blinked against him and decided to settle down for the first time and began thinking of a wife and possibly ten children, God-willing. Everything had been going according to book for the last one and a half year, until recently when the milk of liberty seemed to have gone into the heads of the drinkers. Was he then to stand aside and watch ruin being visited upon his dream of dreams, he whose bullet-proof brains had dribbled the sentries of Paris I and Nantes and then rode on iron fins of the resurrected *Imperial Barge*, without breathing?

He had been pacing available space in his office for ever, it seemed, conceiving and destroying plan after plan, after identifying a compromising loophole. And now, come to think of it, he understood the otherwise inoffensive motto of *L'Ami*, 'Man Alone Fears no Traitor,' and immediately rolled his sleeves for battle. If they had only known that he was a legendary man alone, walking waves on fin backs!

So in a pompous announcement the following week, he declared that *L'Ami du Peuple* was in fact *L'Enemmi du Peuple* and swore to preside at its requiem. But after consultations with his collaborators sparked by the Manager's alarmist prognostics that the students may go mad and tarnish the reputation of the Academy, he summoned the 'ring leaders' to the Discipline Master's office and served a 'first and the last' warning against the perpetrators of malicious writings. 'College policy,' they were reminded, 'always college policy before any other thing,' and urged never to forget, 'was intolerant to arrogance and presumptuousness.'

But Jo-jo listened without opening his mouth since they were not offered the opportunity to respond, and left the office already phrasing his next gospel. It was obvious that he was inflamed to insanity, a fact that was not lost on even the casual and most non-aligned consumer of his next editorial flash line: *Coffin for Administrative Intimidation and Arrogance*. The write-up ridiculed *the first and the last presumptuousness of Despotic buffoonery ... such last kicks of a dying horse ... such kicks dear Reader, which impinge on our healthy way with a lackadaisical mentality*. It denounced the conspiracy of

dictatorship against the students' rights to the glories of free speech, and promised *justice of the guillotine* to those who will be foolhardy enough to stand in the way of Truth. The first victims of the guillotine at the crossroads of drawn daggers, the readers were reminded, are fence-sitters who count on prostituting themselves with the winning camp. It was to be a battle between free speech (heavily accentuated with opening lines of the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence) and the despotism of the Napoleonic Code with which the principal threatened the college universe. With his knowledge of Commercial Law, Jo-Jo blasted his way through inadequate remedies of the Napoleonic nonsense being forced down their throats and bannered justice and equality in bold letters, conclusively.

The college was in a stir. The students watched and listened, and picked up sounds from the walls and then weaved these into statements of fact. They could hear the Principal discussing with the Discipline Master at night, and in the morning decided to ignore the 'Paper,' hoping that indifference would bring some informal truce. But *L'Ami du Peuple* refused to ignore them, refused to be indifferent to the agents of *l'ancien regime*.

In a defiant mood a new column came up and quickly proved the most popular in the 'Paper' after the editorial – 'Glimpses.' A grossly distorted face with thick-rimmed goggles, cut from a satirical newspaper and glued at the top of the column, suggested that 'only caricatures, not humans, would be bitten to the bone and then bashed to pulp.'

'Jo-Jo L'Ami' as the editor was fondly compounded, became a hero among the students and fed on their generous praise. He was their man, their intellectual Okonkwo against oppression from the 'Office' where the cane spoke a language of its own, totally understood and dreaded in its heartbreaking cracks and yet, for the sake of *L'Ami*, solemnly ignored.

But today he glared at the morning assembly and the nuanced air of love-hate and sweet-bitter was gone. He remotely stood there streaming the wicked venom of do-me-I-do-you from his eyes, terrible darts of annihilation which even friends shuddered under, and surveyed the students as if he were looking for a pin in the cold dust of the morning. He knew his targets, and slowly his eyes were fixed on the lines.

'I must let you know today for the umpteenth time,' he shouted in his peaked voice, his eyes flashing, 'since I've always called a spade a spade, that you, senior foxes, with the stumps of your tails still dripping with the blood of ablution, and whose names are still written down in pencil and can be erased at any moment, I want you to know that I look at you and all I see is a bunch of ill-fed caricatures, doomed by a lack of basic home mannerism!' He was breathing magma, his eyes darting across the lines to the flashpoint of battle. 'Else, how can you dare to tarnish my word, contaminate it with the horror of your claws, in the service of an inept authority? Let me inform you then that your behaviour is becoming unbecoming, and I for one will not tolerate it!'

He jumped down and was gone before the students had the opportunity to react with a thunder of applause. He was always in a hurry to depart at the end of his addresses, and glanced back with a haughty sneer on his face. The dry sound of his thin voice still vibrated in the ears of the students. But the form twos who had been specified as target, were defiant, and jeered back timidly at the retreating figure. Jo-Jo L'Ami had singled them out in a nasty way, calling them 'senior foxes,' and were they simply going to lie low and wait to be crushed by the raspy voice?

Tipoung, he's heart dropped. He understood the general flow of emotions against his class, christened as Recalcitrant Humbugs, but not the specific facts.

'Why is he so furious at us today?' he said to Gabby who was standing behind him and was chanting an oracular *I no be talk* to clusters of students who were already trying to diagnose the epicentre of Jo-jo L'Ami's volcanic turmoil.

'You didn't hear?'

'What?'

'Someone smeared his words.'

'How?'

Gabriel had to lower his voice. It was certainly the work of a boarder, for it was done at night, but he was not sure. A few voices even suspected the Principal with his broken English. Someone had used a red marker and scrawled across the green of the 'Glimpses' column in the form of a verse:

*l'ennemi,  
your mami pima  
and long baba,  
l'ami.*

Tipoung'he was silent. He knew what that meant for all of form two. The prefects were going to profess solidarity against their own headstrong cankerworm, and use the opportunity to invade their classes and try to bend their stiff knees once more, and then call them names.

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The following day Sammy, who like his peers had assumed their full portfolios after moving into form five, crafted a thousand and one charges against form two, in collaboration with L'Ami, as a collective reward for their reluctance to surrender the culprit. Start date was Monday. Log-splitting, fence-mending, and scrubbing of the toilets and the refectory every lunchtime, until Pierro, the biggest rascal on campus, had had enough just after the second day and told the others so. His father had lectured him on the logic of the condemned man who resists forced labour since otherwise he would only be assisting the penitentiary boss to tighten the chains of humiliation more securely.

'If you must be a prisoner,' his father had said, glancing at the cover of the little book from which he had drawn his unquestionable inspiration, 'then you must have a crime to show as exhibit.'

Pierro looked into his individual soul on Monday and into the collective soul on Tuesday, and even though he had a hint of who the real culprits were, he was convinced that the punishment was no longer corrective but vengeful and humiliating, and so had outlived its purpose. He communicated his thoughts to the other boys midway their toils on Tuesday, and added: 'Nothing I detest more than tyranny.' The boys agreed and unanimously dumped their tools and marched off the punishment. Sammy was maddened by this 'screaming act of insolence' and rallied a raid into form two after break. The girls who had not been informed of the rebellion were pardoned, but as the boys were marched away again, the girls raised a terrible cry that shook every brick in the school and brought the authorities there within the minute.

'We want our boys,' the girls chorused, and would have nothing less. 'We miss our boys, Princi, bring them back please!'

In the confusion of such unholy purring, and already exposed as a vulnerable target, the Principal fumbled about with the prefects and his collaborators for a solution. He had hoped that a patched-up truce with 'L'Ami' was going to be long enough for the wounds to begin healing, but now it seemed, they may have to trade punches again. When he ordered for the boys to return to class for the sake of peace, the prefects and with them the entire form five, could not forgive the betrayal and there and then declared their own strike, to hands-off every ancillary duty and let the Principal and his beloved class run everything. The following morning and then the next, the form fives boycotted the assembly and stranded on their rows, the students suddenly gasped in disbelief when Pierro mounted the flagpole podium and dispersed them with a simple command like a form five, 'return to class.' Wonders unimaginable, the students agreed, the rascal and a form two for that matter, kicking the arses of the form fives and telling them, did you hear that, and although no one did, they all agreed that they heard the blunt challenge, to go to hell! Soon there were chants of 'Pierro for SP' or 'Pierro the Great' as he walked by casually with his 'western' hair cut and his 'daddy' shirt gathered in a puffy tuck.

'Nyanga boy,' the girls called out, and their *psst-psst* hisses, ready to faint for him, sniffed his footsteps as he walked to the gate with his glowing friends and pretended not to notice a thing.

Tipoung'he looked at him and wondered if this was what it meant to have a big heart. He and his friends were harlequins who basked in the shadows of their hero and did not complain when they had to pay the price whether as individuals or a group. The excitement of belonging in Pierro's sudden reign compensated for the pain, whenever it came.

'*Perriy frères*,' Pierro called as they milled around the food shed, tasting and picking and pinching if the woman was distracted, and they replied intimately, 'Yea, *grand*,' or more formally, '*Grand Pierro!*' On campus or off campus, in class or wherever, Pierro was a small god whose benevolence was also cruel to those who strove to reverse his self-image and wreck his earthly pedestals. He kept a small notebook with the names of his 'targets' and the respective ways



they were to pay. Pierro had crafted a variety of 'ways' and consulted with his small and restricted group of grovelling councillors (whose confidence he earned through his emptying-pocket stunts that always left his uncle groaning every Sunday evening) whether to take direct action, hit-and-run, or just bit-by-bit. His friends looked at him and nodded in agreement, whatever the decision, because he was always a mile ahead of them in the planning and execution.

He loved the attention from his errand-boys, as if it compensated for his smallish figure and blurry eyes that never seemed to open but saw through every shade.

But the cup of fame was getting into his head and he thought himself invincible.

'*Perriy frère*,' he called and Tipoung'he or one of his friends would almost stand at attention, ready to go; 'take this to form five, posthaste!'

The boys stared and hung their heads like half-cut plantain bunches, not sure; it was addressed to the senior girls' prefect, and as everyone knew she and L'Ami were ticking hands of the clock, tick-tack, tick-tack, like that. They knew too that Pierro was an expert at launching indirect spears and then looked in the opposite direction to laugh at his intended victim's perils. But then the boys hesitated only briefly, after all what Pierro said must be done. They paused at the door, unsure of how to exhibit boldness. The student whose desk was closest to the door noticed their lingering looks and barked them off.

Tipoung'he gestured the letter and at the same time as fate would have it, Sammy popped up and snatched it. He glanced at the address and turned again to the boys.

'Where from?' he said.

'Pierro,' the boys said together as if it was a fact never in doubt.

'Emerence,' Sammy called over his shoulder, 'your admirer, the coup leader sends an amorous missive without a platter of L'Ami's head.'

Then he aimed the letter in a glancing way and turned to the boys.

'You're expected to return with a reply, I suppose?'

'Yes Sir,' Cyprian said, surprised at the effect of Pierro's magic on everyone, even on Sammy's wooden countenance.

‘Then come in,’ Sammy said.

The boys became suspicious, something must be wrong for Sammy to adopt a Born Again disposition all of a sudden. There was a commotion in the class, but they also knew that there was no running away from Sammy, Pierro or no Pierro in the background. They dragged themselves into a torrent of insults under which they withered perceptibly.

It was Sammy who again addressed them.

‘Do you see those needles on the floor?’ he said.

The boys looked but saw nothing and knew that they had foolishly walked into the lion’s den.

‘No, Sir.’

‘Sure you do,’ Sammy blinked cynically at them. ‘On your leg and make sure you each bring me one before you leave.’

With that he returned to his seat at the back where his mates were already dissecting Pierro’s psychological anatomy. It was only when the history tutor came in and saw the boys and understood that some form of violation had rendered the impossible task necessary, that he kicked them out to another commotion of mirth. Pierro and a group of boys had been waiting for them at the corner during the short break lull and burst out laughing when they returned with hooded visages, and the only consolation from Pierro was for them not to worry, two *beignets* each tomorrow break.

The group was discussing Pierro’s latest escapades; he had jumped the wire at night and spent two hours with his girl and was even brandishing a letter from her, simply addressed ‘Mon. Pierro,’ for them to see.

‘*Mon* Pierro,’ he read, his voice dripping with the juice of pride, ‘that’s how she claims to own me.’

‘But tell us,’ the boy called Lord Nelson urged, ‘so what happened?’

‘Yes, what happened?’ Lucas added, stretching his long neck to read what was written on the envelope.

Having captured their attention, Pierro seemed to suffer a momentary loss of memory and so had to drag the story from his kneaded brows slowly, if only to prolong the misery of the others.

‘Remember how in the movie Sunita caressed the soul of her lover?’ he said at last, and as the others nodded, ‘Tipoung’he tried to imagine the soul being caressed. He watched the film at King’s

but could not remember the scene just described. But it did not matter since the others were willing to lap up the story without questions.

‘That was what happened to me, the god with my goddess.’

The boys laughed and agreed that Pierro looked like a god, even an Indian god. They were privileged to be in the vicinity of deity.

But Pierro was already distracted.

‘Excuse me, Nyango,’ he said to a small girl who was passing nearby with three coloured pieces of chalk in her hand.

‘Me?’ the girl said, stopping with alarm.

‘Yes,’ Pierro said and gestured her to approach. ‘Who are you having now?’

‘Geography.’

‘Is Geography who?’ Lord Nelson said.

‘With the beautiful Miss Dwala, right?’ It was Pierro whose voice suddenly became conspiratorial.

The girl smiled and said nothing. They all knew what the boys said of their Geography mistress and who could blame them, poor things, the bigger girls said under their sheets at night in the dorm, when the woman was like the daughter of the Earth goddess.

‘Will you please ask her to stop and see me after her lecture?’ Pierro said in a most solemn voice.

‘What,’ the boys exclaimed, ‘are you mad?’

‘No,’ Pierro said quiet as ever, ‘I mean business.’

Then he stooped to adjust his shoe lace.

‘The *Surveillant* disrupted my party the other night,’ he explained, straightening himself; ‘and will have to pay. I want to hit him where he’ll groan forever.’

Lips were flapping over his ‘affair’ with Miss Dwala and some asked what on earth she saw in his stern nose like a stick and eyes like pebbles.

As Pierro spoke he nudged Lord Nelson and twisted the corner of his eye. Almost in unison, the others also looked with twisted glances and suddenly the girl realised that she was standing in the centre of the male ring. As she opened her mouth to say ‘I cannot say that,’ she noticed that none of the boys was interested in what she wanted to say; instead, they were staring at something – beneath her! She nearly swooned when she saw the small pocket mirror placed between her legs and reflecting her sacred horizons. She could not

withhold the hot tears, and even the threats from the boys could not calm her. As she dashed away, confounded by her catastrophic disgrace, the boys also disappeared in different directions. Pierro always carried the mirror to school with which he admired his hair-do and beard just beginning to show. He applied saliva to it and then brushed it this way and that way, like a *Chef bandit* does in a Western, he said, or twirled it between his fingers and pretended to be lost in his own thoughts. For he was always thinking, and became tired that way, on how to rescue his classmates from the tyranny of the school prefects. Responsibility showed on his face and in his squirrel eyes.

Just before the last lesson for the day, the girl and her Big entered 'Two A' and confronted Pierro.

'Who do you think you are?' the Big screamed. 'The Mister Big Stuff of the Academy observing iron *polos*?' Then she went on to describe Pierro in a thousand other phrases, all ending with some big word, nonentity, rapist, caricature, and ingrate. She had just been transferred from a Mission college and her grammar, it was said, would put the English tutor to shame. 'Iron polo' or 'seven lines' was a social marker and the female students who did not wear a *zipong* collapsed under the ridicules of male x-rays penetrating the semi-transparent cloth. But the Big was no ordinary girl with her mission school far-away look that reduced the adventurous male ego to nought. She was still to make true friends in her new environment and so clung to her Small like a hawk. She put off the advances of the senior boys who knocked horns after '*La belle chose*' and because she was foolishly proud, they vowed to humiliate her. Why should she be in Bamenda and pretend to behave like a Roman princess? Pierro, the latest adventurer-cockerel bowed to her verbal assault and never even once looked up to acknowledge his challenger who threatened him to 'wait and see' and then stormed out of the class as she had entered, with her protégé.

Then the French started and the students sighed in weariness to the tongue with which the principal bred confusion. Few, like Pierro, enjoyed the *grammaire* exercise because he always spent his holidays with his parents in Yaoundé where his father worked in the ministry.

To generate a platform for dialogue the tutor asked Pierro to make a sentence with the feminine of 'beau.'

'La belle chose dans la carniveau,' Pierro said. There were titters across the room and the tutor was confused.

'Quoi?' the tutor said, wide-eyed.

'La belle princess, Monsieur...' he said, faintly smiling.

'Mefiez-vous, jeune homme,' the tutor said.

Soon, the whole class was weaving phrases and sentences in honour of their favourite fantasies and the tutor thought he had an excellent session that day.

But suddenly the simmering tension of the last weeks came to a head sooner than expected, on Friday, and took everybody, especially Pierro, by surprise. His network of underground Black Stones had failed to gather intelligence about the impending storm. That morning shortly after Pierro's majestic dispersal of the school, even before the roll call, he was summoned to the Discipline Master's office where the administrative cream of the school was seated with a few prefects. It was an opportunity for the administration to mend fences with the prefects and as is always the case, a scapegoat would be necessary for the ritual of appeasement.

'Where were you and what were you doing on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>?' The question knocked Pierro off balance; he did not expect them

to come at him so directly and so soon. *If you don't know what to say, then say nothing.* It was the voice of his father, again invading his senses on a rescue mission from bloodthirsty hounds. So he stared at them woodenly, hoping to identify a crack in their polished countenances. Words became little needles with which his brains were jabbed in acupunctural manoeuvres, to no avail. They had to resort to the last option to which the Discipline Master eagerly complied and pulled out a short plaited cable from his drawer. Pierro knew what was coming and without waiting for the usual command of 'arms stretched in full,' he exposed himself and tried to cut off his feeling self from the act of justice. The whip rose and fell and thick red lines showed in the palms, left and right, until the Principal raised his hand. Pierro did not blink and not a drop showed in his eye.

'You want to show that you are a man, eh?' Mr Mbaya said; 'I'll be right back Sir,' he said to the Principal and went out. As he walked along the long corridor the noise subsided in the classes like departing rain across the hills. When he reached form two he ignored the biology tutor and flickered his index finger at Josephine, Pierro's

girl who muttered 'ba'luck' before getting out of her seat. Back in the office he ignored the Principal's exclamation, *Ab, la-viola* as if aware only then that one and one make two.

'The friend of a thief is a thief,' Mr Mbaya said and two rapid smacks into Josephine's fleshy palm led out a murderous wail from her throat.

'Stop wasting my time!' Mr Mbaya said and was about to resume his task when a sudden whimper caught his attention. It was Pierro feeling the stab to his heart in telepathic sympathy with his sweetheart.

'Ah, *le Generale* Napoleon betrayed by the broken heart of his woman!' The Principal was jubilant in solving the puzzle on how to break the salamander's will.

'That's just the tip of the iceberg,' Mr Mbaya said; 'you can return to your class.'

All caution dashed against the wind, Pierro laced his fingers with Josephine's and tried to console her.

'The only way for them to get me,' he explained, 'was to get you. But don't worry, I'll balance the accounts soon.'

Instead of going to class, he led her to her dorm to do her toilette and returned alone to his expectant mates, a look of victory in his eyes. But he said nothing except a cryptic Zebrudaya phrase that was always at the tip of his tongue and used to adjust in ambiguous circumstances, 'What are come to a man are equal to the man!'

When the closing bell was sounded and as the students rushed toward the gate, Pierro instead planted himself at the foot of the steps into Germaine Chambers for a final assurance to Josephine. But a commotion from the direction of the gate set him off and he ran into the stampede of students screaming toward him. A group of form fives had emerged from the gateman's shed with whips as the students rushed toward the gate and the accumulated blows nearly shattered the skulls of those who had been ahead. Deafening screams and a chaos in retreat, stumbling and cursing seemed to enrage the senior students and to make matters worse some of the students started calling for Pierro. They were herded back into the assembly grounds and reminded by the senior prefect of the demons that must be cast from their midst at all cost. He recalled the events of the past week and pointed out that the gangsters who had profited

from the misunderstanding must be nipped in the bud before their nocturnal adventures spiral out of control. With that he looked over his shoulder and nodded, and Mr Mbaya who had sneaked into the group of form fives unnoticed, mounted the flagpole stair and in one glance judged and condemned the assembled students.

The assembly was suddenly a silent and doomed species. Even the weaver birds that had been rioting in the pine trees a moment before seemed to be attentive. Mr Mbaya allowed the tension of the silence to sink into every heart before clearing his throat.

‘Let me go straight to the point,’ he said. ‘We intend to make of you good citizens with high moral score per annum, and not Black Stone ruffians apparently cursed to the marrow by their ancestors.’

The suggestion was very obvious and heads turned to spot Pierro whose signature name as *Grand Katika* had stuck like glue immediately his mates opened *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Even the assistant Discipline Master toyed with the name whenever he was privileged to renew a vow against the machinations of the gang, and would then boast of buying a special drink the day Pierro shall walk out of the gates for the last time.

‘The devil is alive,’ Mr Mbaya was saying, ‘and some of you, unfortunately, are his convenient host.’

He paused long enough to gloat over the expectant looks on the students’ faces, their recent skirmish already displaced by anxiety for a new show.

‘A diabolic act of insanity,’ he declared, ‘was committed in the vicinity of this campus on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>, an act which it is my displeasure to inform you, has been replicated in several ungentlemanly ways ever since. Where is Achale Pierro? Step forward please!’

No longer in doubt, the students stretched their necks and climbed on their toes to see Pierro’s reaction in his supreme moment of glory. It took him forever to walk the ten metre distance and stood there as in no man’s land inspecting the quality of the polish on his shoes.

‘A while ago in my office,’ Mr Mbaya announced, ‘I requested to know from this gentleman where he was, with who, and for what reason, on the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>. His disrespectful silence proved his guilt and the action we are going to take today is a final warning

to your appearance before the Disciplinary Committee, after which, as the Committee shall deem necessary, you may be asked to seek your future elsewhere.'

Heavy words that meant nothing to Pierro, and to prove this he pocketed his left hand and bit his right fingernails.

Mr Mbya unfolded a piece of paper and read out the crimes against Pierro.

'On the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>,' he read, 'the student Mr Pierro Achale violated his day-student status by assuming the place of a boarding student. To do this he scaled the barbed wire fence, a criminal act in itself, and therefore punishable according to the rules and regulations of the establishment. Then he compromised the boarding regulations and further influenced a female student three and a half years his junior to skip bounds and together at the ungodly hour of midnight, they deprived the goats in the school shed of their final night's sleep.'

The laughter died down as soon as Mr Mbaya's bloodshot eyes swept over the place. Then he addressed Pierro directly.

'Young man,' he said, 'the Administration took a too lenient stand on your role in last week's confusion and it seems you mistook that as a licence for unbridled acts of indecency. You have gone to the extent of writing insulting romantic notes in horrible English to your tutors, senior prefects, and worse of all feeding your perverse fantasy on an innocent form one girl's private.'

The last sentence came out with a struggle and he blinked and coughed before pulling the words from his mouth. But relieved of the burden he also got a more prosaic inspiration with which he described how the rascal had knowingly dropped a mirror between the girl's legs and had fed his demon eyes on his victim's innocence. A lively ripple again went through the assembly ground and this time Mr Mbaya sanctioned it with a faint smile, aware that his sharp looks, this way and that way, failed to intimidate the animated students.

'Such abominable acts, as abominable as anything imaginable in the devil's own kingdom, can no longer be tolerated. Here, my dear Sir, we operate by the law. We may on occasion twist it, but we never break it! The law has finally caught up with you and you must pay the price.'



Saying this he descended from his triple step throne of authority that was splashed with the national colours, and called out four hefty students, three from four and one from three, to lift and stretch out Pierro, face down. They lifted him and spread him out like fresh hide on pegs being prepared for drum lining. Then Mr Mbaya stepped forward with a sneer on his oily face, his little eyes twinkling over his parted lips. He had already put on his ugly mask of discipline, and his cane, as it fell on Pierro's buttocks, spelled out the word 'vengeance' in Tipoung's mind. His heart was beating and felt condemned too for his participation in the mirror spectacle. He recoiled from the heavy cuts against flesh, and felt his knees tremble and clung miserably to Cyprian. At first he was counting, but either because of the endless strokes falling and falling like hailstone, one after the other in maddening succession, or of his own fears casting a numbness over his ability to tally, Tipoung lost count, blinded and rendered deaf at the same time by the sharp gasps that the students sucked in, *hsspl!*

'You little truant,' Mr Mbaya panted, catching his breath briefly, before the cane rose and fell again.

Then it stopped and with that the students' gasps now eddying in breathless shudders, *hmm!*

But Pierro was still suspended, a Superman without the power to turn things around as he always boasted; a giant tadpole over the heath, scarred by bitter pain.

'This is a call for you to be a well-behaved student henceforth,' Mr Mbaya said, his lips trembling with expiring emotion. The students too were in suspense. They had expected Pierro to scream and beg for mercy. His endurance baffled them and they said so in unanimous silence.

Only a long, strangling moan came from the downcast face: but it was of defiance, a rascally whimpering, that relief had come at last.

'What do you say?' Mr Mbaya repeated.

'Father forgive them,' Pierro gaggled with all his strength, 'for they know why they do it!'

For a moment Mr Mbaya and the prefects and the bearers looked at each other and opened their mouths but no sound came. They pretended as if everything was okay and would have given anything

at that moment to be gone; the Black Stone always found a way to celebrate his victory, and no matter how, he ended by crafting the humiliation of the other. The assembly was beginning to stir once more into life; Pierro was not dead, so why should they mourn in heavy silence. And then the sound started from the back and grew louder and the students picked it up and repeated it toward the front, timidly.

‘Spartan,’ they shouted; the creature that dies but never surrenders, that was Pierro. But the voices died down when the prefects started walking through the rows.

When they turned him upright Pierro simply collapsed in a conscious act of desperation, and had to be supported by two of the form fours. But Mr Mbaya suspected this to be Pierro’s *coup de grace* to the crowd, and so made hasty remarks about the lesson of the afternoon, stressing that the Administration will not allow chaos to take over the college in the name of freedoms.

By the end of the week, his new title was on every lip, and it was agreed that Troki and Black Stone were dead, slain by Mr Mbaya’s monstrous appetite. But some malicious fellows decided to squeeze the juice from the new name and insisted that it was Satan. And every week, convinced of Pierro’s new status, the students imagined a rhino-horn where his brows kneaded, failing which the Economics tutor simply said ‘demons’ and continued filling out the blackboard with notes. He was sceptical and said the performance of the students was alarming, and he felt like dying just to imagine that they were going to drag the reputation of the school in mud.

Tipoung’he had withered like the rest of Pierro’s disciples into the shade of authority and between classwork and house chores, he dreamt of other places away from the frustrating environment of the Academy where time seemed to stand still and only recorded in end of term ceremony. Until one morning he realised that his surname had to change from Penn to Alioum because he was to register for the GCE and there was need, Metsi pointed out, to harmonise their identity. Tipoung’he was piqued by the idea of a new name, but felt like a Judas against his father’s brother who had believed in him from the start.

That afternoon he and Mbouju accompanied their sisters to Jobisco’s Fashion Home to measure the graduation outfits, and Tipoung’he felt less guilty in the excitement. Job Masamba was one

of the ruffians who had tired of every line of menial chore in Nyenmechop from shepherding to motor-boy, until the pendulum swung back to the beginning and found them squatting on the sidewalk of misery. Like the rest of the squatters, Job was bored with life itself and yawned his desperation to anyone foolish enough to listen to him argue strongly that opportunity comes but once and how could they say he was finished when his opportunity was still to come? Ready to cling to the serpent to save his nose from disappearing under the river of desolation, he was relieved to receive a hurriedly scribbled note from his former Saturday night *combi* who had learned to cut and stitch in Douala but had recently relocated to Bamenda and wondered if Job would join him. Always ready to move Job was in Bamenda by sunset, and in the evening, as if not a day had elapsed since he and Adolphe were together, they rushed out and painted the humidly stale city red. 'Jobisco, Yeye Boy,' they still called him and wondered why he had embarked on premature retirement to the village. As the months of apprenticeship went by and he started taking orders and doing minor work, Job too wondered and started talking of business and how *business di waka small or not at all*. The reunion was fruitful eventually and again they went a-squandering until Adolphe finally squandered the remaining life in his cup and with his dying breath advised Job to 'take time because weti do coffee go soon do cocoa.' Job buried his friend with the misery of an orphan and a week later the business placard changed to his ingenious crafting.

Tipoung'he read the bold print over and over again, admired the cursive letters, the shadowed highlights, and knew he was going to practice them that evening. Jobisco's shirt was the latest *centré* craze and unbuttoned at the chest to expose his hairiness, and his muscles too bulged as he scribbled in his book or worked the scissors, while Metsi insisted on the double bend for the velour and horizontal, not vertical pockets.

They stopped at a discotheque for the sisters to collect their cassettes, and Tipoung'he read the sign with the arrow pointing, *Silent Taping: from High Life to Kossa, Etc*. The boy was manipulating buttons, showing off, Tipoung'he thought, reading the titles of the albums that were stacked in dusty columns against the wall. His sisters collected their cassettes of country songs, which they always

played while already in bed and the cassette would stop automatically on its own when they were already snoring or they get up in the morning to discover that the tape had spilled out and entangled itself around the rubber pools and they had to beg Mbouju to manoeuvre the rubbish out. On their way home they had to stop at their uncle's who lived above the municipal fish pond. Wondon was weary because of her aching legs and complained against the diversion, but her elder sister insisted; she knew Wondon nursed a grudge against the old man ever since he lied about their waywardness in town, so that their allowances for the next term were slashed almost by half. But Tipoung'he was excited because of the opportunity to again see the fish in the water, waving their fins like little Asiko dancers. He lingered behind and leaned from the iron bridge to watch the creatures sneak out of their reedy hideouts and wriggle away or dive back out of sight at the slightest threat. Watching them, Tipoung'he imagined how it would feel to have a big pond like that for the municipality, from where his people in Nyenmechop could fish, a fish for each villager, his own miracle for the hungry.

## Chapter Four

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### Ache Head Sons of Mulafako

This was the season of migration, 'Tipoung'he said to himself, having crossed grey interlocking hills that frowned down on the battered Dyna that groaned along the no-go territory of rice paddies and forest of skinny palms with scattered hamlets and over the Menchum Fall singing its lonely tunes, to stand again at Mile Fifty, groping for way and meaning. Overgrown byways and conflicting sentiments traced longitudes and latitudes in his heart and emboldened him for this moment, returned once more to prattling fantasies. The Academy was history now and his heart's desire had been fulfilled, and a proud joy had filled his cup; but suddenly, against all speculations, he must return to Aghem, the dreamland of dreams where the estuaries of childhood plaited their hammocks in fluffy carnations. He must return there and live the wonders of childhood once more, the eternity of memory's glory. He still felt the promise in his heart and knew that it was to be found if only he looked hard enough and stood firm on his feet. The memories gushed back like the drippings of a waterfall in the forest, stringing their stories back with them as if it was only yesterday. And so only yesterday it seemed he had felt the soft warmth of Anna's slippery back and clung to her while she lounged into the sun-steamed river behind Chief Akou's palace. She called him 'my massa' and 'my only massa,' and he felt the power of 'massa,' his little grip on her shoulders, afraid he may slip off and be dragged into Mammy Water's kingdom below. On the lee bank where the girls quickly scrambled away from the crazy boys and dried themselves in the sun their bundles of firewood were leaned against the huge trees that bordered the palace from the browsing allotments, and often Chief Akou would drive by in his black car and they would wave and shout *sanoub!* And he pulled at his little white beard that seemed to be squeezed by the huge white turban

and smiled back from his seat behind the driver, his spectacles catching the rays of the setting sun with a spark. And he waved back at them and they cheered. The rattling of hooves around the car as the bodyguards jostled for position obscured his face that was always smiling at them through horse limbs and thighs and was to remain a verse in the eternal music of Aghem in 'Tipoung'he's ears. Then on Sunday they attended Sunday school where Anna assisted the teacher and must have him do the twist during singing to show the other children who were sneaking away that he was her massa.

*Alleluia, alleluia,  
Hosanna the son of David Apama  
Christina Mambo,  
Monica Ashawo dog.*

The children clapped as he twisted, in line with the other dancers, descending gently on their knees and straightening again, their hands spread out and their eyes smiling and picked out friendly names from the group that went into the unending song until Anna halted him and said that was enough, let the others continue. Then they returned home for lunch but Anna branched off into their compound and promised to come and see his sisters later. Their mother filled their bowls with *nkwi* but put the meat on a separate plate after which they wore the intestine on their fingers inside out, and nibbled at them in bits. When their father came in and saw them, he snatched off the meat and threw it to Bobby whose wagging tail went into a frenzy. The children screamed and their mother only said 'I told you,' but there was nothing they could do against their father whose belt was always ready to pinch a spot on the stubborn head. Soon they heard Sango the blind man chatting with their mother at the end of which he would be rewarded with kolanuts. The crying eddied off and the children rushed out and formed a circle around Sango who staggered as they danced under the mango tree where their father always tethered the cows.

Sango troubo  
Ali-ya!  
Massa Yakobo,  
*Ali-ya!*

Then Sango would repeat his stories again to them and they would listen as if for the first time, how ‘troubo for eye no good,’ and his trip to the white man’s country where he met the father of Herr Klaus who then took him to their Chief and they looked at his eyes and said he had already crossed the bridge. So they instead gave him his dark goggles and that was why he had four eyes. As he spoke his goggles hung from a chain around his neck and his eyes dazzled with pride, blinking, and the children heard the old echo from his throat which no one else could produce. They leaned on his huge staff and he seemed to lead the way for them, singing and laughing and wiping away his sweat.

But time seemed to have been moving backward and Mile Fifty was dying, if not already dead and buried, and Tipoung’he saw only the shell that had been so beautiful with life and promise; the people wandered about with distant looks in their eyes, as if they could not understand anymore. He saw them and heard their woes in the monotonous drone of the bus, whining and spurting uphill or trembling downhill. In that dazed moment memory brought back the days of green in Aghem, and filtered them into the incongruous spectacle of lanky men and women still toiling along the sidewalk as of yore, and Tipoung’he was no longer in dreamland. The sun stood overhead always, and their eyes were blurred from too much straining to see beyond their shadows, stepping over the stumps which only yesterday were shoots of hope.

Where was the milky horizon from which the dove called the morning sun and the morning sun peeped from behind clouds-skirted hills still drowsy with the heavy dew of sleep? Tipoung’he listened but heard only the whooping coughs from parched lips; and he looked up at the horizon and down at his feet and saw only scratchy patches of clouds and broken tar and dilapidated equipment balloting his friendship.

‘No leave, no transfer,’ the people said in their scary comportment, ‘because water go leave stone always,’ and seemed stuck with the ghosts of Aghem rising from darkly corners of noon. The river always returns and the stones always awaited the flush of return. Tipoung’he remembered how his mother sang the little sailor boy’s song to them on their way to the farm and said the sailor boy always returns, and how old Maagha fed them with bananas while their

mother and the other women heaved the soil. They were crossing the bridge that moulded like a lump on the face of the earth now and it looked just like Tipoung'he first knew it and he remembered how he planned to put a boat on it one day, but the banks were drained to a rooty surface of sun-baked cracks, and where the wild flowers bloomed in their evergreen foliage, only shrubby twigs entangled the mud and a grudging volume gurgling away. So he concluded that time had indeed stood still in Aghem, chewed the shoots of hope to the stunted stems of dread, and the grey horizon of bush fire was evidence.

But he was to meet his father's friend, the watch repairer who was consequently christened with his profession, and the man yawned his amazement at the little baby who left only yesterday.

'See,' he said to his neighbour the tinker, 'see the big man wey don return now, *ka!*'

The tinker glanced at Tipoung'he, taking his mind briefly away from his task, the stub of his wrapped tobacco stuck in the corner of his mouth.

'Ah, so na small Alioum this,' he said without conviction. The stub danced in its corner as he spoke, and for thirty minutes Tipoung'he surrendered himself to their authentication of his identity, recalling and juxtaposing and then confirming before the Repairer remembered to gather his gadgets into a small toolbox and lead the way home.

If Aghem had gathered rust onto its corrugated roofs and resigned itself to inevitable calamity, Bou Road seemed to be an exception in the dilapidating town, and displayed her pride of a few well-to-dos on both sides of the bituminised road. The pharmacist and the forest inspector had their modest dwellings to one side with little signs announcing their portfolios at the entrances. Roughly in-between the two, on the opposite side, the only tourist hide out in town, incongruously named Merry Lodge. Tipoung'he read the notices as they went by, sifting through cause and effect threats and challenges to his sojourn with a lingering premonition of thunder in the dry season. Then they turned into the big yard that had not even a leaf fluttering where it was not wanted, and when Mr Repairer opened the door to his room, Tipoung'he gasped in disbelief, immediately recognising the low plank bed of his childhood night



wettings and how the following morning their mother would force his buttocks into the disturbed anthill and the little monsters sank their fangs into his exposed flesh and fed on the scent of his mess as a warning against his repeating the act. Their father still used the bed that was to become his again, Tipoung'he thought with a grin.

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A month and a half had already slipped by almost at a blink and Tipoung'he was still to accept the place that was indifferent to his intrusive return. Everyday he left for school Tipoung'he searched for the Aghem of his dreams, but only cobwebs stood in his way. The tap that he used to stand on his toes to press, so that the water splashed over him and made him dizzy, was only a stunted piece of steel now barely reaching his hip. The trek across town was sheer torture to him, skipping over the carcasses of dead dogs and chickens and cats, marked out as one of the superior students, and yet refusing to recognise the slimy embraces from overflowing gutters that whispered meaningless testimonies about how the place was what it was, and you had to take it that way or walk away.

In class, fraternities were forged, the presumed rascals against the presumed refined, and the tutor took sides.

'Those of you from *commercial* institutions,' he said with disdain, 'make sure you don't corrupt the morality of *our* well-bred students.'

As the class roared and booed, depending on the sway of fraternal emotion, the senior discipline master, Nicodemus Rarh materialised in front of the students and twisted his huge nose and his eyes popped out in rebuke.

'Now, anything for me?' he said nodding to the prefect.

Apouh shuffled between the desks and handed the list to Rarh who cast his rolling eyes over the sheet.

'The same old gang,' he snorted through his blocked nostrils. He was always having catarrh although he never sneezed and only punched his nose with the handkerchief. He read out the names and the criminals and crooks and sinners and pagans stepped out, each crucified to a tag, Kahewi, Kangning, Tipoung'he, Funwei, and Nchinda.

'I said so,' the tutor ventured from the corner into which Rarh's administrative hand had squeezed him, addressing Kahewi and Kangning; 'I warned you against the *shi-shi* mentality that only contaminates your cultured ways here, but you never listen and now you have to pay the price!'

Rarh resented the intrusion into his territory.

'Mr Mukoi,' he said to the tutor, 'any incriminated so far?'

The tutor was taken aback, he had not thought about that.

'No Sir, I don't think so,' he said.

'Then let me handle this,' Rarh said, and added a generous 'if you don't mind.'

Of course Mr Mukoi didn't mind even as Rarh took his time to walk up and down the rows, pausing to stab a page with his fat finger to lecture the student on 'equivocal verb positioning' because rules are rules and apply to everyone, teacher and student alike. He was about to turn into the next row when he stumbled over Kahewi's foot and for a moment the class thought Rarh was either going to pass out or demolish the poor boy with a ghastly stare. Instead, he breathed heavily and swallowed something before addressing the boys who were facing the class, the mark of Passover showing on their wrinkled foreheads.

'Wait by my car you demons,' Rarh said and sneaked through the rows; 'when you choose to compromise with the devil, know that I'm always watching you.'

Then he stopped at a desk and pulled the boy who was sitting between two girls by the collar.

'Son, make sure you don't compromise with the devil, okay?' he said and the boy nodded nervously.

Rarh was opposed to any form of juvenile compromise of the sexes and spent the entire thirty minutes at the morning assembly to make his points, one after the other, how the serpent left Eden and sneaked into the pants of boys and men, and the world would never be the same again until the accursed thing is crushed, its head cut off to make assurance doubly certain. Strict discipline was what they needed as students, without which the devil would build his nests and lay eggs of ruin every night in their laps. Desist from compromising, he said, and it became a prelude to the singing of the national anthem, which also had to go through tonal variations of

purity, and Rarh would not hesitate to stop the singing midway and ask to start afresh, if his pricked ears picked out a false note. Alert to everything uncompromising, he stretched the moral argument into every *neki* pie if only the native could be so ingenious, and then invited Apouh to read the Benedictus. The students started calling Apouh names, the most palatable being Rarh's Mass Servant or Rarh's Holy Bitzer. Kahewi gave the first and Tipoung'he the second, and like wild fire in the desert, the names spread onto every tongue and even his friends would say, 'But you know that's true na?'

Only that Apouh knew when and how to have his revenge, and the lists of recalcitrant students whose mortal sin was perpetual compromise with the devil even by whispering in class, slipped off a page of his 408 ledger on the hard back of which was written in bold, 'SP's JOTTINGS' and eventually found their way, together with the culprits, into Rarh's battered 404 Peugeot.

When the bell rang and Rarh sighed his apologies to Mr Mukoi, who 'must however understand the need to keep a constant eye on these children,' the condemned students peeled off Rarh's car and stood at akimbo, awaiting sentence. Rarh looked at them from head to toe repeatedly, and smiled like a Gorgon.

'Gentlemen of no fortune,' he said, 'opportunity comes but once, I'm sure you know that, so make haste while the sun is still up. This is your last warning. You may return to class.'

Even as the boys strolled back to their seats and made faces to the elated class, they could feel Apouh's itchy fingers already reaching for his pen. Criminals are always criminals, Rarh would say, and there was no reason whatsoever for him to doubt his SP whose Catholicism, he added, was unimpeachable. But in their class which combined the humanities series because of inadequate space, impeachment was a daily privilege. They were the Chinese Parliament and cut through each other's words with *bing-bong* incomprehension, not caring. Tribunals were quickly set up, submissions made, and fraternities breached in the name of impeachment or not. And crossing carpets, Kahewi denounced his tribal conclave, spat on the privileges of his alma mater and associated with the new-comers from 'the *shi-shi* commercial places' where those handicapped by the Common Entrance exam ended up as pathetic casualties. As the class roared in a turmoil of

deliberations, teacher McJohnson with his thick negro beard would peep through the window and wondered if Gerald Durrell had not merely touched on the tip of the iceberg about the potential of his black brothers to raise Cain irrespective of their numbers. He had been adding figures next door, where the remaining arts combination huddled together as Monks, a name that was passed in a recently unopposed bill by the Chinese Parliament in an attempt to literalise Chaucer. At a numerical disadvantage of one is to five, the Monks could not mount any significant counter-motion and so clung to their figures and landmarks with a sense of fate. Only on rare occasions like during the philosophy or French, could they feel a bit of the riotous world, and experience the free fall of imagination in a cross pollination with the Chinese peers.

And the philosophy tutor would say, 'Can man know?'

The class was intrigued, a new sound had invaded their consciousness, and they listened as it tickled every fibre of the soul, and fed them abstract nutrients that gave wings to their steps. They were wise men, learned fellows, even learned colleagues, as they addressed each other at the *Alonge*, sucking their beer like famished bushbabies and regurgitating their tutor in proud abstractions.

'If man can know, what can he know and to what extent can he know what he knows he knows?'

They were celebrating the infinite fertility of the human mind, even abstract, scoring points against a dumbfounded lot of lousy retailers who knew nothing about the Ontological Question, and whose unscrubbed mind-plates treasured only the last coin of rational ignorance. Looking at the ignoramuses from their bunched superiority, the students sniggered over their big words and wondered who could doubt that ignorance was indeed a delicate exotic guava which the uninitiated are the poorer for not touching?

'Lackadaisical ignoramuses,' Anyeah said, and Tipoung'he looked up and smiled. His friend used the phrase on anyone who crossed his way on a rainy day, and then kicked pebbles all over the place as a final act of defiance. Tipoung'he knew the story of his life like the back of his own hand, and when they sat recalling the life that was still to be called theirs, Anyeah was always calling up places that meant little or nothing to Tipoung'he. He had aged before his time, he always confessed, and if there was anything like premature

ageing, he concluded, he was the excellent specimen. Due to an abortive male rivalry while in primary seven, he had jostled with the big boys for the back seats in class, and the teacher had intervened, a King Solomon over a disputed seat, and decreed that all backbenchers would be privileged according to age, no more no less. Even before the others had time to reflect on the matter, counting off their fingers and even their toes to be sure of how many calendars they had torn, Anyeah, first son of the village preacher, who also recorded births and deaths in the rural community of close to twenty-five thousand people, jumped to his feet and cried, 'fifty-nine!' There was consternation in class, and the teacher too stared.

'You mean nineteen fifty-nine?'

And that was what he meant exactly, and no one, teacher or friend will persuade him to see differently. If he was too small for the ranks of fifty-nine, then, he boasted, he must be a small old man. The teacher was faithful with his records when registering the pupils for the Common Entrance and First School, both of which condemned Anyeah to eternal pre-maturity. In Aghem finally, he felt the years weighing him down, what if he did not make his papers the following June, then he would not be eligible for any of the numerous competitive exams, because the years had already cut him off any hope for university admission. So he strolled along the broken streets looking for lackadaisical lasses to heap his frustration on, talking grammar to the gaping mouths that chewed kolanut or tobacco. Anyeah frowned on the rural laxity and said he knew what he was saying.

'Don't depend too much on someone because when a parasite stays too long on the host and the host dies, the parasite automatically dies.'

They rolled in filtered knowledge of their supremacy, erecting boundaries of words against which the blundering townsman crashed and cursed. They met a few of their *zam-zam* tutors at the *Alonge* and felt no qualms to venture into their 'corner' where they crossed their legs, snapped their fingers when stressing a point, and tapped their skulls when even their thinking cap failed to retrieve the data needed for a scholarly display. And to this corner the forces of social osmosis set to work, targeting those who needed to darn a

pretentious outfit to their lapels and so bought their places with free bottles to their intellectual comrades. But as in every garden, the fruit which attracts also carries the seeds of discord and soon the feeling of camaraderie was slain on an altar of sentimental rivalry.

‘That is absolutely uncalled for,’ the police officer who had recently graduated to the ranks of the intellectual corner said, threatened to the roots of his soul by the affront to his manhood. ‘The question has nothing whatsoever to do with my moral engagement as a community man.’

‘But what if it does, and what can it be, otherwise?’ Mr Nkumsa said, glad to have his grip on the other’s throat. He had a bag full of historical evidence to prove the point, beginning with King David who washed his hands in the laps of concubines.

‘Was that right or wrong,’ Nkumsa said, ‘he being a man who held the moral tablet in his hands and had the responsibility to uphold the law.’

The jab was too close for the officer to pretend indifference anymore.

‘This is the problem with you long pens,’ he said; ‘you twist everything the wrong way to suit your own caprices.’

‘May be you need to be reminded that I’m in no way responsible for your short pen!’

Their horns were finally interlocked in a confrontation of the century, as Molah reported the incident the following day in class in the interim before the next lecture started, improvising gestures which he believed must have been ignored by the contenders only on second thought, due to the environment.

‘All because of woman,’ he said, and the honourable members of parliament cried out for more. They had read about the two Pitts, and their cries of ‘Hear! Hear!’ vibrated through the class and spurred Molah to the peak of hyperbole.

‘And the Old Pretender who set Cain against Abel,’ he said in a mocking whisper, ‘is one of us.’

A big cheer went up, the girls crying out for more and saying ‘*yiergh!*’ in ridiculous sympathy, and soon OP became the official synonym for Delilah.

Before the victim – who had been telling everybody that her mother’s kid brother was a minister in Yaoundé and that it was only a matter of time before she moved over there – could react and

gather her posse of greenhorn Takoumbengs to gnash their teeth and expose their curse against the ruffians, bad news was brought to class by Kahewi who rushed in and in breathless bursts, announced that the economics tutor was leaving. He had been appointed elsewhere and so Molah cried, appropriating the news, what was the use staying behind, if the heart of A2 and A3 and A4 was removed? Before anyone knew it he was rallying the students to march to the office across town and petition the authorities so that they could then petition hierarchy. It was unfair to do such a thing in the middle of the year. Unable to convince the class he called for a vote and took upon himself the task of the electoral office.

‘Those for, hands up.’

Hands went up, repressed and encouraged. Tipoung’he looked around to see how his friends voted. He remembered the old philosopher in Nyenmechop who devised an easy principle for decision making in any democratic process. When in doubt, take note of the numbers expected to vote. Then make sure you go with the majority vote; they never fail, even if they are wrong, he said. But none of his friends reacted. Molah counted and counted again to make sure, and wrote the total on the board, 56.

‘Those against.’

More hands, count and recount, and the total, 73. Still Tipoung’he and his gang stayed aloof, after Kahewi challenged the authenticity of the announcement and then challenged the one-man electoral commission.

‘The fence-sitters,’ Molah called out, and before hands could go up, Kahewi again jumped to his feet.

‘Not fence-sitters, but neutrals,’ he cried.

A debate followed as to whether it was fence-sitting to refuse to vote or mere neutrality. Whatever the case, Molah realised that he had lost the vote, but his mind was made up; he would not stay behind when there was no one to rely on anymore for his papers. A quick farewell to the class followed by a see you in Yaoundé, and then he was gone.

In the afternoon Rarh came in not only to make the formal announcement but also to introduce the students to the new face sent to replace their beloved tutor.

‘He’s a graduate from Yaoundé,’ he said, ‘and be sure to have fresh knowledge from the source.’

The new face, part of the government’s ‘Operation one-five’ to check the spectre of unemployment, studied the faces staring back at him and decided he was in his comfort zone. A few were already smiling and making suggestive eye contact and the blood rose in his veins, and the rite of passage was easier than anticipated. He had a way of dragging his words out, whether he was pronouncing ‘national income’ or ‘mummy.’ The students awaited the second and as the weeks went by and he gathered pace because he had had to take things all over again, never satisfied with half-baked stuff, Mr Ghorgs took his place at the *Alonge* corner, was fed with lies in return for his theories about the economic nightmares of Aghem. For, the place had refused to advance with the rest of the country and being posted there was like being trapped in the latrine. Then refreshed, Mr Ghorgs came into class and noticed a dosing female student.

‘Is the going not going, mummy,’ he said, tapping her gently on the shoulder.

The boys whistled and then cheered up and very soon the going was actually going for everybody who played cool. Life was not complicated, Mr Ghorgs declared, if only people did not complicate it with too much opportunity costs. He was an exponent of the economics made simple methodology and was spat on by his colleagues of the old school who wanted to strangle him for spoon-feeding the students. Mr Mkopaks, for instance, who always seemed to have undersize trousers in which his buttocks bulged and quarrelled each other when he walked, raged against the newest Christ on campus and stamped his foot on the ground and vowed that no authority would make him change his mind. He had seen it before, when a student in England, and had been a classmate with that imp who could not even do his shoe laces but was soon to become an economics god, an authority whose text the students kissed before going to bed. How his entrails churned with the agony on which the students were crucifying him, his own notes being despised in preference for a foreign breed. When the students pointed out that his notes replicated the text he claimed they did not know what they were saying and that it was in fact the reverse. Stanlake had plagiarised him without acknowledgement, which was intellectual dishonesty.



But Tipoung'he was suffering over his economics as they moved into calculations. He had enjoyed the smooth sailing of demand and supply, the charts and the graphs that complemented everything until they were introduced to the headache of national income. He looked at the figures and knew he would never go through with it. He suddenly felt he knew Sissy Jupe, who needed a bit of the national cake in order to clear her circus brains. So he wrote to Anderiya about the difficulty.

*Anderi,*

*I registered to read econs, not maths. Now they bring in figures and decimal headaches and percentages. Econs has always been dd & ss, but now the tutor talks national income, which is nothing but cracking of kernel and I can't do that. The thing makes me dizzy so I must give up and concentrate on the stories, which still make me feel my horizon where I fly. For econs, truly I tell you, not even the spirit is willing, and the flesh? – simply goose-pimpled.*

He handed the letter to Mr Ghorgs who was going to Bamenda that weekend and had no idea what he was carrying. A week later Apouh returned from the office with a bundle of letters and started sharing.

'Mr Voice of America,' he said, and Tipoung'he looked up expecting his usual magazine and postcards from the station. But there was a second letter and he recognised the rough scratchy hand of Anderiya. Lengthy salutations from everyone Tipoung'he knew in Bamenda even if Anderiya did not see them, bits of gossip, and his own studies before a single line about his main concern. 'The hunter who selects his bullet before going to hunt shall one day eat without soup.' The remaining paragraph was about their holiday schedule, how Tipoung'he was to meet him on campus from where they would strategise. 'Don't forget I'm the school SP,' he concluded, 'and you shall have a hundred of my Smalls at your feet.'

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The college moved to the 'new cite' at Mile Fifty on the periphery of the town, and overnight mushroom habitats sprouted all over the hillside with flattering names like Monte Carlo Place, Côte d'Azur, and Hollywood Eden. Constructed more than a decade

before, when a presidential decree planted *Lycées* all over the country to justify the rhetoric of official bilingualism, the place had been a cluster of pearls in the wild elephant grass, with rodents as the main residents. Abandoned also to a cluster of administrative bottlenecks, while the contractors' bills kept on mounting, the principal finally announced the transfer when they were closing for the third term. Although the dormitories were not to be put into use for a couple more years, the students were jubilant, they were no longer scattered all over the town, and in their seclusion, they knew their distance from the rest of the population. The lone building of the second cycle was separated from the rest of the school so that the students looked down the sloping campus and agreed that they were really in 'high' school. Only the one-storey administrative block proved higher.

Tipoung'he moved from his Bou Road shack to Court Yard in his father's refurbished house, and became lord of the mangoes which his friends mounted and perched on the branches and soiled their uniforms with the juice.

The term was as ordinary as any other, although the students felt a bit more clinical and mysterious, disappearing from town in the morning and reappearing in the evening, like guardians of a secret. During morning assembly the rows of two, male and female, streaked down the slope like patterns on the landscape, and sang the anthem in turns, each class a day. The rest stood at attention, and Rarh sniffed the air wildly for a false note, and detecting one, waved frantically.

'Stop, stop, stop!' he screamed and waved frantically, and awed and humiliated, the singing stopped and he intoned the various parts meticulously. After the singing, announcements were made, and the students filed off beginning with the first years.

At Mile Fifty, the students soon realised, being notorious was the closest step to heroism. The 'senior' students felt distinguished and beyond censure from the administration, and in their midst, suddenly emerged a 'Critics' bunch and after much debate as to whether 'The Sons of Mulafako' or 'Young Ramblers' be maintained, they finally settled on a neutral 'Ache-Head,' although they claimed the blood of the forest beast ran through their veins. On their way out of the institution and the Aghem enclave altogether, and

invincible to peer and administrative scratches, these honourable members of the Ache-Head coterie hung their necks on a campaign for decency, on and off campus. Responsibilities were shared out. Neba, with his tall muscular looks was to be the oracle and read the bulletins every Monday and Friday mornings; Nchinda and Mongoh infiltrated the first cycle and picked out their 'eyes' and 'ears' as underground fellows who then sneaked into the bars like invisible smoke and gathered I-hear-say tit-bits. 'Tipoung'he assisted in the write-up and was the cartoonist and sketched their victims in monstrous streaks that left the entire class laughing with or without recognition. As the Chinese parliament, they declared, it was incumbent on the class to advocate universal human rights with freedom of speech as top on the list.

'Who born dog,' they cried, and dared anyone who campaigned otherwise to come forward.

Nchinda would stand up and picked at his teeth. There was a chicken parlour on his block and it did not matter if his mates accused him of feeding on the discarded bones; his tooth-picking, however, was a prelude to the day's cup of coffee, as they still called every Ache-Head write-up.

'Pipou,' he said, '*bi-yuh*,' and ceremoniously ushered Neba to the front.

As usual, the Prelude was read.

'When in cruel April,' he began, 'the flowers wither and heavy, sea-never-dry pockets leave town suddenly, desperate daughters of Jaguar Nana roam the streets of Naikom-Overside and lay traps at the entrance of Merry Lodge, hoping for a Johnny-Just-Come to blunder into their perfumed claws. When luck eventually smiles on them and they drag the catch into a local bar in the suburbs, only to find the class prefect in the corner sucking bowls of *akwacha*, it is only reasonable, Pipou, to assume that two bottles of *Jobajo*, one after the other, would seal his lips. Fortunately for us, Pipou, Ache-Head has eyes and ears that see and hear beyond concrete, let alone mud walls, and there our narrative begins.'

Ears were pricked, and already, targets could be identified. The sketch on the board, with its exaggerated jelly-coils, narrowed down the potential victims to about two.

Neba licked his finger and flipped a page. But as he cleared his throat and was ready to deliver the hot cup, the door creaked open and the English History tutor scratched his bald head with a knowing sneer. Prototypes had been lifted from his notes to feed the columns of Ache-Head, and it was even suggested that his method encouraged student dissent.

‘Take your seats, you clowns.’

Mixed sighs greeted his command, and soon the students were scribbling in their notebooks and pausing to listen to explanations.

A student wanted to know if Cromwell’s action could be described as a coup d’état. Mr Mambo smiled and then nodded, and went on to explain why in his opinion, the English, as self-proclaimed makers of civilisation, would be unwilling to tarnish their history with the ignoble word. Then he went on to further elaborate on the intricacies between the Church and the Crown, which necessitated a man of action to put an end to it. Yes, it was not only a coup, but in fact one of the earliest in modern history.

The lecture ended and Neba took his place again in front of the class after the door closed behind the tutor. There was a tense moment as Binji also got up, her towering figure dwarfing Neba. She had not written a line during the History, and seemed to be sitting on nails. If the boys had taken the school hostage and subdued everyone with Ache-Head hypnosis, she was going to be the exception. She rushed to the door but paused and turned suddenly and grabbed Neba by the throat.

‘What do some of you boys in this class think y’are?’ she spat out, tightening her grip and speaking through clenched teeth.

Shocked by the unexpected assault, Neba was suddenly helpless; his manhood was tamed for one brief moment and apparently disappointed by the lack of resistance, Binji flung him off and dashed out. The door slammed behind her.

The class was alive with opinions and insults. What right do the boys have, the females challenged, to poke-nose into someone’s private matter? Now it was certain to involve the administration and what would they say, big for nothing fools?

But Mongoh thought otherwise. He too dashed out and descended the stairs three at a time and met the junior discipline masters on their way up.

‘What have you done to Binji this time?’

‘She wanted to strangle my friend for reading the prelude of Ache-Head.’

The two understood and smiled knowingly. Even with its man-no-run excesses, they agreed that Ache-Head was not the product of subversive elements as Rarh suggested during one staff meeting.

‘Is that why she ignored us and went instead upstairs? She seems to forget the law of gravity; what goes up always comes down, no? We’ll wait for her when upstairs refers her to downstairs.’

The tension persisted for a week, and the class camaraderie suddenly collapsed. The Ache-Headers were not to be trusted again, if they could vaccinate one of their bosom friends who called them ‘boys.’ Who would be next, when they go mad again?

Into the second week of spite, when suspicions resurrected old boundaries, the VP finally came to class and talked to them of his life at Ibadan and how no one could even pee in the shade at night without risking his name on the ‘Spy’s Board’ the following day.

‘Use Ache-Head to build,’ he concluded, ‘but do so without walking away from one another for you may end up walking alone.’

A huge uproar of joy followed; the long-awaited official endorsement of Ache-Head, through the backdoor, had just been sanctioned, and who ever doubted their lenses sweeping up and down the slope, across the rural and urban fusion? But the burden of reconciliation was almost too heavy to carry. Glancing looks and sheepish salutes, almost reluctant and painful, and ‘Tipoung’he dreaded the looks of accusation like arrows aiming for his heart from orbs that once absorbed him into intimate spheres.

He returned home and munched his corn-chaff without appetite. Binji was still indifferent toward him, and that shattered his world. She had often cuddled him during sports and when Nchinda and the other boys cried foul and the girls cried ‘*yiergh*, let the baby grow a bit, no spoil’am we beg,’ she simply smiled, and said he looked like her kid brother and she was there to protect him from the stench of their rotten boroughs. She patted his head and gave him a sweet, mouth-to-mouth, and his eyes were blurred and he thought he was going to suffocate. Nchinda had smacked her buttocks and more yelps of *yiergh* greeted the mad slash at his face, but Nchinda was also a cat and knew how to avoid the painted paws.

‘But why you di waste time with pickin, na,’ he said, ‘when I dey, and very ready, eh, to give you all from morning to evening, me the real JJC!’

But the sports master had called on him to do the javelin, and he walked away backwards, sign-talking to Binji. Now the protective warmth of her arms was gone and Tipoungh’he imagined how Judas felt after he betrayed his master. Perhaps they had over-done it, he thought, and felt hollow in the confusion of his thoughts. What if he told her that the others had urged him on? But that would be a second betrayal, against his friends, and a step from the frying pan to fire.

His appetite had gone; he felt as if he were swallowing pebbles, over-spiced to please Nahbila, but she had looked at him after a first spoon and her small forehead wrinkled.

‘You be nought,’ she said and forced a laugh.

But Nchinda and Anyeah almost finished the *alubassa* pot and asked who prepared it.

His meal over prematurely, Tipoungh’he carried the things to the other room that served as his kitchen. He wanted to rest, to forget the numb feeling, but how could there be rest when those you cared for were indifferent to every attempt to pacify their anger. Lying on his back and staring at the ceiling, and counting the squared patterns in the bamboo ceiling, first to the left and then to the right, but could not do so north and strenuously to the south, Tipoungh’he refused to accept that he did wrong. I may not be perfect, he had read somewhere, and then scribbled it on the back of his Literature, but parts of me are excellent.

‘What parts?’ Binji had said, and showed it to Nahsang who screamed, wide-eyed, and then gossiped him to her sister at home. They tore his explanations apart, told him what they *knew* he meant, even if he didn’t mean it, and laughed in uniformed ululation, their palms clashing in a common understanding.

And she had looked at him and her eyes dilated behind her glasses. She had been to Her Lady of the Rose College beneath the peaky cliffs of Bamenda, where the latest culture implanted by Sister Serena left the medical doctor with a small fortune from prescriptive glasses. The girls were looking for beauty and discovered it in the framed miracle, delicately perched on their sanctimonious noses and their heads slightly tilted, they walked in groups of three to five during

outings and the park boys whistled as they passed. Tipoung'he wondered what she would have thought of him then and his not-perfect-but-excellent theory of concession.

He repeated the words in his mind, and found nothing in them to suggest the type of bad-boyhood that Nahsang had suggested he was a victim of. That was what he would tell Binji tomorrow if she listened, that he meant good and never meant to hurt her. She would surely understand or at least soften her looks of terror that devastated his world. Then she would reprimand him and tap his skull with a big sister caution, 'Never do'am again, you hear!'





## Chapter Five

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### Bitter Seeds of Faith

Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he was disturbed in his heart and as always, sought comfort in himself. Recent events had placed him at a crossroads of indecision and he was searching for himself and for meaning. Was he not where he once tasted the milk and honey of happiness and walked sacred avenues along which myriad dreams had bloomed in absence, away from the mysteries of genesis? Aghem had held a magic lantern to his childhood dreams and cut off by inexplicable contingency, he never forgot the distant skyline that skirted the mountain range and embraced the morning sun in a heavenly image that hurt his sight. How was he to tarry for long, without returning to the source of primal energies, of the beauty that never dies, steeped in the energy of thunder in Aghem where anger and love embraced also in eternal kinship? Memories of the hospital and its broad and roofed corridors along which his father walked his bicycle, Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he perched at the handles and too weak to walk the short distance to the doctor's room had condemned him to come back. He had been stretched on the bed with white sheets over plastic that always smelled of iodine soaked in cotton and pushed into his wounds; then his temples were pressed, his stomach too, and the doctor listened to his chest through the tubes connected to his ears. Then he scribbled in his notebook, and told his father it will be fine and not to worry. Wheeled back through the same corridors, a brief stop at the pharmacy to get his drugs, and another brief stop where they sell *kuru-kuru*, but he will not eat anything, although the doctor had insisted he must eat before taking the tablets that always stuck in his throat even after his father broke them into four. So they sped through the busy streets, his father wheeling now, and the wind blowing fresh sensations into Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he's pale face and made him well, his father returning greetings or simply sounding his bell, *kling-kling*, until they reached

the slabs where his boys were busy slicing chunks and hanging and unhooking limbs from iron rods in the wooden rafters. His father balanced him on the bike and went into the stall and returned with the liver that he was to stew as pepper-soup for the boy when they reached home. His mother had gone to the farm and as he drank his soup and bit the meat with his front teeth, he felt dreamy because the compound was too quiet and his father's steps as he walked around, echoed from a distance. Aghem of his pepparsoup dreams at noon, and everywhere bloomed with development as he left for the Nyenmechop of ancestral shrines, and how was he to stay back, from the dream that was still to end?

But Aghem had been a cold bowl of ash in his mouth; every pothole of the broken tar reminded the people of the once-upon-a-time era, and as he stepped into the potholes he felt the jar of time nagging at his dreams, bits of which stood in the eyes of the townspeople like broken pieces of calabash. All around he saw the carcass of the place he had loved, abandoned by leaders whose speeches built monstrous castles in the sky while the people groaned under leaky thatch and zinc. Their history tutor had talked about history revealing itself in cycles, and his literature colleague had read a poem about builders of the nation who tore chicken limbs in beer parlours, and sang the national anthem in reverse. And over his small repairer-battered transistor radio, the Voice of America recalled the voices that made the African the continent proud although post-independence liturgies had washed the paint of celebration by dawn and now the broken bits of the ceremonial gourd rattle in the people's eyes. Little John and his querulous gang, they said, were seers who allowed their vision to be corrupted by people who did not care about their own people. Tipoung'he twisted the knob of the radio every evening hoping to hear new voices, but the faint voices from distant waves, rising and falling, planted twigs of doubt in his heart.

He went to school and returned in doubt, as Rarh fetched appropriate prayers from his Prayer Book, according to the season or day or event, like to the nation and for the wisdom of its leaders. Rarh fed them with the piety of the leaders, the peace of their authority that showered on the nation like heavenly beams. The Upper Sixths were called up every morning to recite a prayer in

front of the assembly and to 'Tipoung'he they were just words that jumped out of the pages of the tattered book that Rarh guarded like a relic of paradise after the Fall. From Monday to Friday the students took their turns and must appear as sharp as a needle, Rarh recommended, pursuing this with his stumpy fingers against a missing button, a dirty collar or a poorly pressed skirt whose plaits did not flare out. Rarh was most passionate about the unity of the Church and 'Tipoung'he listened to the plea about its 'scandalous disunity' like pebbles on the roof, but it meant nothing to him, mere words like a kindergarten kid singing the national anthem without understanding a word and yet almost collapsing in the passion of patriotism.

Gradually, 'Tipoung'he began to question Rarh's spirituality, his choice of prayers, and hard-hearted nature. Soon it was his turn to rehearse the prayer for the following day, and he tip-toed into Rarh's den and stammered as he reminded Rarh of his mission. Rarh stood up and surveyed him like a rare species and then fetched the book from a pile on the shelf. He flipped through the pages and pointed out a prayer and then walked out. Confused, 'Tipoung'he ran after him, his finger stuck between the pages and surprised, Rarh stopped and regarded him with benign fury in his eyes.

'Read boy,' he said, 'and not chase me down!'

As soon as 'Tipoung'he started reading Rarh raised his hand without turning and 'Tipoung'he hit the brake.

'Stop, stop, stop!' The martial barks came from the back of his head as he trotted along down the corridor. 'You're praying, remember, not singing.'

Then he turned and peered into the open book.

'Father of Light and Wisdom, pause, thank you for giving me, pause, and so on and so forth, pause, pause, pause, remember that!'

'Tipoung'he followed him and suffered, his lips moved and the sounds came out of their own accord, as Rarh made an unnecessary round of the lower classes, and held up his hand for 'Tipoung'he to stop while he popped his head around the slightly opened door and made irrelevant comments about this or that discovery of his holy mind before withdrawing. 'Tipoung'he felt exposed trailing the knuckling feet ahead like a sheep and the students giggled at the familiar circus as he stumbled over the plaintiff words about the mind that knows and the heart that loves.

But to know and love what, his philosophy tutor would certainly query, his soft voice tweaking in the mockery of knowledge and supposed knowledge of knowledge. But Rarh was oblivious to uninspired human assumptions, philosophical or not; his strictness, Tipoung'he concluded, rounding off his burden, was simply torture and Rarh himself a fox in sheep skin.

On Sunday he went to church clutching his St James and Hymnal, but only saw Rarh in the pastor who was sweating over his sermon about temptation, suffering and death for the just cause. Then they sang songs of passion and just after the first verse Tipoung'he felt hungry because his stomach muscles were strained in singing, and only hummed the rest of the verses. He left church that day torn between Rarh's abstract spirituality and his pastor's submissive meekness. The latter was a simple preacher whose indigenous ties made him waver between the altar and the shrine. Tipoung'he and his friends often took their philosophy assignments to him and he shredded the ontological question to bits before patching them up into a shivering God whose presence was beyond doubt. The following day in class however, he began to overwrite the details of name, class, school, and subject on his notebooks in the order of Tipoung'he, of eighty-four, Tipoung'hist, and Tipoung'hism. It was an experiment in denial, and affirmation of personal *isms*, Tipounghist for the faithful and Tipoung'hism for the faith. Tipoung'he pondered over the equivocation of historical fact, who gives the name defines it and then forces it down the throat of the world and resentment develop into a nasty imbroglio, splits and more *isms*. Always more and more of them, and the human mind was plunged into a dizzy search for meaning, skipping from one pole point to the next and without conviction.

Bemused by his own thoughts, Tipoung'he returned from school one day and after resting decided to walk over to Nahsang and discuss the literature. Nahbila opened the door and screamed for her sister to come and talk tonnes of unseen poetry. But she instead came waving a packet of cabin biscuits and they spent the time eating and talking. Nahbila dashed in and out of the room, flirting with him but he was still intimidated by her openness and almost hated her for being too bold. She was a face that had jumped unexpectedly from the past and crashed into his consciousness with blurred details of their crisscrossing feet in opposite directions along

Hospital Street, he to the Academy and she to the PS nearby. In her neat blue uniform, she skidded along the pavement with innocent concentration, her feet in brown sandals walking the roughly pebbled sidewalk, and oblivious of his entrapping gaze. His friend Cyprian had warned him against looking at her too much because her father was a policeman and would shoot him down the moment he saw him sneaking around his house. But she had disappeared and he had forgotten about her till the moment he met her with Nahsang as they returned from the Aghem market and immediately saw the resemblance. She had been just a week old in town after poor health forced her to be transferred from the Lady of the Rose to be with her sister. Even before Nahsang introduced her as her sister, he was afraid his ribs were going to explode and they laughed when he told them about his fear of their father, because it was their uncle who wore the uniform.

They chewed and talked, and as night fell Ebai came in singing what he called Bakossi love tunes, slowly swaying to the rhythm of his own Ebunji voice. He was a monk and asked if they heard the breaking news that Rarh made an unconscious pass at a female student and received a nasty slap for his thank you.

'Imagine the old man preaching against the devil,' Nahsang said, 'and yet compromising with him!'

'Will Ache-Head take revenge and expose the old nuisance?'

'No,' Tipoung'he said, shaking his head, 'it was Ache-Head policy never to avenge itself.'

'Why not?' Nahbila wanted to know.

'Revenge was always another way of the pot calling the kettle black,' Tipoung'he said casually; 'and encouraging one's own self-righteousness that may be as crooked underneath as Rarh's creepy counselling.'

'So you'll let him get away with it as if he's the saint he's not?' Ebai again cried; 'the fellow ought to be crucified for all to see!'

'If that's to be the case,' Tipoung'he insisted, 'it won't be for revenge, just the communal voice sticking needles into steel brains hoping to bring them to order and make others wary.'

Nahsang brought more biscuit in a plastic plate and they stopped talking and crunched their cookies like goats their grub. Then Nahsang suggested that they go for a walk across the Court Yard to the other side of Aghem overlooking the hospital and the distant

hills. She had read Wordsworth and tried to impress the value of rural scenery on Ebai's mathematical mind. They crossed the main highway into the Court premises littered with abandoned caterpillars of the Public Works Department and passed through the farms and their scanty crops behind the Court halls and talked aimlessly and pretended to admire the landscape. Nahsang had read a few of 'Tipoung'he's poems, longish drafts that drawled on almost endlessly about the sun and moon and the stars awakening his springtime love that was undefined. They were milky verses with a conscious rhythm, clumps of adjectival passions that transplanted Tintern Abbey to the shallow banks of Bamenda Wata but he was too shy to show them, and had snatched the sheaves from Nahsang and felt the urge to hate her for violating his sacred grove. He had been weaned of twinkle, twinkle little stars but still wondered now, why the Aghem star still hid behind the thick nimbus clouds that seemed to have no silver lining, but did not know how to proceed. As they walked and talked 'Tipoung'he and Nahbila lagged behind beginning to whisper their own feelings and watched the other two stray off, unaware. But 'Tipoung'he did not know what to say, his thoughts were all meshed up and stuck in his throat, and how was she to understand him? How terrible he felt, a stranded fool on the shores of victory.

As his mind railed against his dreams and they walked and talked in bits and laughed, she especially because he was talking like a capital nought, his fingers became numb with cold and felt against her flesh like dead stumps, when he reached out for her hand over a gutter filled with twigs. She suspected that he was suffering and asked if he was okay. He smiled in the dark and said yes, but saying to himself, if only you knew. The tons of poetry on his lips that would not make utterance, the upheavals of self-incrimination that were rooted within his lips that would not open, and the many, many views of himself, the hero, scaling the heights of heroic challenge, only to look around and find the two of them standing in the shadow of a broad tree, speechless. His heart fluttered with pain of indecision, for he knew what she had been through, a last born that was spoilt with too much motherly attention. The men who saw her humus texture were hypnotised and vowed to appease the maternal gaze with gifts and sweet talk and promises, only to let her down in the end, and she wriggled in pain.

'Mama, my heart aches,' she cried, tossing on her eight-spring bed and the mother's talons were stiff against any cock dance around her house. Yet, the men, always the smart, shifty-eye young businessmen with their hope-rising motto, 'the young shall grow,' tracked her down below the cliffs of Bamenda, penetrated the shrouded conclave of the Rose, and then devised Santa Claus strategies against the ever needy veil of the Sisters so that during outings, and on weekends, an unknown uncle performed a hat trick and zoomed her away. Soon, her grades began to shudder through the mist of rendezvous, and mother Eagle, already concerned with the infrequent trips home, was terribly shaken to learn of her little baby's escapades with the young tycoons whose 'certificate of death' motorcycles or *quart-cent-quart* Peugeots played cricket music when it rained, *tshaarr*. If only she had been told that indeed Igbo boys are dangerous at night, so beware, soul sister! But it was Mother Eagle who took that as a call for battle against the money-drunk cripples but the police were too sympathetic with the pressure of bleeding purses, pleading the brotherhood of Africans, both ancestral and modern. Aggrieved, she vowed that her child would never return to the Lady of the Rose again, even when the term was only half gone. She must be dispatched to Aghem to be with her sister, even if their father pointed out the foolishness of putting her eggs in one basket.

Nahbila had confessed all of this to 'Tipoung'he in bits during the first weeks of their reunion and said she was hardened against any masculine teeth-smile.

'So you understand now why I belong to no one,' she had said, and 'Tipoung'he almost heard her voice quivering again in the shadow of the tree. 'I cannot feel free with anybody; I can't love the person I want freely.'

That was like a century ago, and he felt the fear creeping back into her tense veins. He tried to assure her and squeezed her cold hand. Even if she had to start all over again, he said, hating himself for sounding so cowardly, it does not mean things would be as before, good or bad; what was important is that they make it worthwhile. He wanted to say more, wriggling on the Calvary of his dreams, that the only constant is the flame that she kindled in his heart eternally, that he wished she felt a bit of what she made him feel, and that she made him feel the beauty of the world. He wondered

where he had read such stuff for it sounded so original it could only come from a book he read. But she would say he was only talking, that he didn't know how vicious tongues can crucify a soul without trial.

'I was there once,' she once said, 'and won't want a repeat of the experience.' She was almost angry and so he kept quiet, his lips refusing to move even as his mind revved volumes per minute. 'I just feel horrible because I'll start hiding again from myself, from my family and from everyone around me. So many people are so interested in my affairs and when I sneeze news of it spreads in no time. I can't freely be with the one I love and do you know how that feels, Tipoung'he?'

That had startled him, the intimacy, the veiled accusation and all, and he staggered blindly for answer but none came, choked by the burden of his own thoughts. Those words forever bore holes in his heart through which he perceived and forgave the world its trespasses, and cried with a satisfaction that knew no end.

But feeling his own fingers firmly after skipping gingerly over the twigs, Nahbila called for a wrapper from her sister who was then strolling back with Ebai, if she did not mind and Nahsang said no, she did not, if only they were not to indulge the beast with two backs, and offered the cloth that had been wrapped around her waist and the loose end flung across her chest and over her left shoulder like a *Bororo* girl with her colourful bowl balanced on her head and chanting *milike* endlessly. Nahbila threw it over their shoulders and they were engulfed by a sudden warmth. Tipoung'he relaxed as his heartbeat increased, and there was no need to worry too much about what was said or not, as long as this tryst were sealed in speechless commitment. Scary thoughts of speaking out of tune, of being misunderstood and then misquoted, imposed a discipline on his struggling manhood and he suffered as they retraced their steps, Nahsang again teasing them about tearing loaves, which he did not understand and did not want to risk knowing.

'To know was a curse,' their philosophy tutor had said the year before, looking out of the window across the yard where the nursery school kids played, always surprised in their prattling ways that a short fence was erected to bar them from crossing over to the other side of the yard, and added that 'at times the best freedom can be ignorance of your own being.'



By the time they moved to the new site Philosophe, as he was to be known, was definitely weaving strange plans in his philosophic skull and for which he recruited the students who were only too happy to be involved in 'research.' They went out with a hastily written questionnaire to interrogate the villagers about the reasons behind the low level of education amongst the Aghem youth, most evident with the female child; the rationale between the Christian God and Nkoh, whether opposed or complementary; and other matters related to income and expenditure, and other sociological variables that were to be packaged into an equation that interrogated certain traditional mores against an encroaching modernism. Philosophe skimmed through the returned sheets, asked a few questions of the student-researchers, how they felt doing what they were doing and how they felt about the way the respondent felt. He heightened the mystery of his metamorphosis by slinging a small pinhole over his shoulder every morning with which, from awkward locations that provided curious angles into the viewer lens, he would snatch cartographic phases of the place. He was always deliberate and seemed to take forever to click off the shutter with its rustling chuckle, and pretended not to notice the colleagues and students staring and whispering. Then one morning they came to school and Philosophe did not show up for classes and soon a rumour spread through the campus that he had vamoosed to no one knew where. From hindsight, they understood his radical change of comportment, thrashing his traditional jeans and t-shirt outfit for a more executive outlook, 'and ta'king like a Dir'ctor, yo-you see na,' Ndibabonga said, nodding in appreciation at the disappearing figure. The others agreed, there was a significant change in the departing gait, and after the week of absence they again agreed more enthusiastically that there had indeed been a seismic change in the soft-spoken God-questioner. As if to corroborate that opinion, but more from administrative exigencies, the Principal sent out a radio communiqué and by the second week, Mr Gghorgs received a telex from the suburbs of Wittenberg that said simply: 'Ole Boi, *Alonge* regards from Hitlerland and to rest of Bunch.' Mr Gghorgs was furious, momentarily forgetting his lectures, how could Philosophe be so mean, after they shared so much in common from defying Rarh's hypnotism to clubbing from dusk to dawn? The man used to knock

on his door at 2 a.m. and would not leave until it was opened and then insisted that they go out for a beer that would become an endless string of bottles troughed down their gurgling throats, after which he returned to his studio with just a bed, a line with a few t-shirts, a stove and cane cupboard with a few utensils, insisting to those who urged him to live life that the greater life was inside, not outside. Now he was gone without informing even his closest buddy, and how was he to ever trust humanity again, Ghorghs said, frowning.

Darkness had engulfed Court Yard by the time the lovers returned. Was it not ostentatious emotion, Tipoung'he thought, to see himself as a lover already? True, they had clung to each other and walked like snails, but that could mean nothing for all its significance. Still, he was fluttering in an unknown realm, and for once did not regret that the afternoon had gone by without him opening a page, with the exams just around the corner. Suddenly, he remembered that they were in May, and filled to the brim with evidence of romantic images come June, he also thought he had acted out a verse or two from classroom theory that evening. He turned the knob of his radio but did not know whether he was listening to the news or to the eloquence of his own heart at peace and seeking more peace.

## Chapter Six

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### The Strike

He had dosed off when suddenly there was a rushing of feet outside, shouting his name. He jumped up in panic but quickly recognised the voices and the strident urge was only a fake.

‘Four rain-boots,’ Nchinda’s brazen voice called, ‘show your nihilistic face; where art thou, knave?’

‘The guillotine is here at last,’ Mongoh added, and there was a banging on the window.

‘Patience, my boy,’ Anyeah said like the preacher, ‘you turn is now, and there’s no escaping.’

Tipoung’he listened, pleased to be distracted from his crippling feeling of loss that had burdened his brief sleep. But he would play along.

‘Go away, demonic philistines,’ he said.

The others instead laughed.

‘Open up or I break down this damn door,’ Nchinda said and banged repeatedly on the door.

‘Hey, man, there is an emergency, open up!’

They rushed in as soon as the key clicked, through the empty parlour and into his little room that was littered with books and papers.

‘Read this,’ Nchinda said, and shoved a sheet of paper into his hand.

‘What is it?’

‘Just read,’ Mongoh said.

It was a letter from the Association of Anglophone University Students calling for ‘nation-wide boycott of classes by all Anglophone students until the government put a definite stop to the attempted baccalaurisation of our system of education.’

‘What’s baccalaurisation?’ Tipoung’he asked, and the others laughed.

‘Are you not the Clerk of Oxford?’

He read on, however, the schedule, plan of action, and details well laid out. In the end he had a vague idea of what was required of them, and how Yaoundé was to transmit information through secret channels to avoid official surveillance.

‘But how are we to act on what we don’t understand?’ he said.

‘Don’t understand what?’ Nchinda asked. ‘That we have to go on strike?’

‘No,’ Tipoung’he said, ‘not that, but the reason why we have to strike.’

‘Are you blind?’ Nchinda challenged; ‘Baccalaurisation, that’s why!’

They had difficulties pronouncing the word, and that added to its mystery. There were already strikes in various parts of the country, even in Bamenda, and Aghem was expected to join the divisional phase of action. The three others already knew what to do, and had come to Tipoung’he, he realised, to finalise this. The plan was simple, to put up strike posters at the entrance of the college very early in the morning, for which Nchinda was the best espionage agent in the group; and then make the students aware of what to do. The governor was to visit Aghem Division the following day, and the strike was meant to coincide with his trip, for full dramatic effect.

They spent the rest of the afternoon phrasing the rebellion, which Tipoung’he then inscribed on the posters the three had bought. **STAND UP FOR YOUR FUTURE! – NO TO BACCALAUERISATION – NO TO EDUCATIONAL OSMOSIS;** and then in small print, explanatory footnotes, drawing on the letter from Yaoundé. In the end they stood back and admired the result of their vision, and then shared responsibility before disappearing into the night.

Tipoung’he could not sleep and kept tossing between the sheets and the hardness of the bed, until about 4a.m. But by 7.30, like the rest of the students, he was rushing through the college gate and surprised as well to read the bold letters of the strike poster at the gate and then on the wall of the Administrative Block. There were gasps of surprise and excitement; a strange feeling overcame the students as they anticipated what it would be like to experience a strike.

During assembly, however, Rarh threatened the excitement, and frantically waved the posters which he had removed, and dared anyone, whosoever, to try and disturb the serenity of the institution.

'I will sniff out the devils in your midst,' he warned, and danced in agitation, twisting the posters and already sniffing wildly.

The sound of sirens stopped him and he yelled orders to the various classes at the same time that the Principal emerged from the block with the other administrators. The Land Cruisers crushed the granite paths and the doors flung open and almost immediately the security men skipped out and ushered the Governor toward the baffled and hastily assembled school protocol.

Governor Apouke shook hands and uttered a few words, as the Principal introduced his team, and then the flag rose gently as the students sang the anthem. Then a brief word of welcome from the Principal and his list of 'perennial grievances that have mounted over the years, your Excellency, and shifted from one provincial administrator to another,' with the hope that the Governor would address them now, etcetera, etcetera.

The Governor thanked him, above all for the orderly nature of the students especially as every other part of the Province was on fire. He assured the Principal that government action may be slow, even very slow, but in the end it is always implemented. He was rushing first to the outskirts of the Divisional HQ, and on his way back would address all the students from the various institutions in Aghem town in one big assembly.

There was a brief tour of the school and presently they left to the tune of sirens and the classes dispersed in confusion, with Rarh fuming anew. His office had been ignored during the campus tour, and how did they expect him to maintain his sangfroid? Even Job had his limits, and the Lord would have been shocked with his reaction if the man had been left in misery for just one more day. Rarh had woven his own yarn of a miserable disposition to the provincial boss, what with a cubicle for an office, no filing cabinet, and not even a moderate chair for his officially thirty-something years buttocks. And as always, the Principal, a small boy for that matter who returned from England only a few years ago and was green with inexperience all over his face, had cut his leg in an act of peer betrayal. He, Nicodemus Rarh, the backbone of the institution,

had his own plans, and if he were to execute them, the small boy who thought himself the Minister of National Education, would certainly have other things to think about.

He walked back to his cubicle and did not bother how the students rushed against his sagging knees, and picked his thoughts with his cane, tap, tap, tap, on his bald head.

Shortly after the first class started, Apouh was summoned to the office. As Rarh's spy within the socio-religious world of campus life, it was obvious why he was being sent for. Their spiritual identity forged an unquestionable solidarity, based on the Common Prayer Book, and a purity that infected every other student and staff, including Moslems and Baha'i. Apouh eyed the Ache-Head spaces on his return, and without a word, returned to his locker.

'What are you and Rarh up to now,' Funwei asked, alarmed. He was ignorant of the scheme, and 'Tipoung' he felt another Judas stab from his own hand. But they had agreed that the fewer the insiders, the better.

Before Apouh could open his mouth and say 'shu'rup,' as he wanted to, the door opened and Rarh himself stood there and glared at the suddenly hushed class. Then he stood aside and the Principal and his entourage came in. The Principal gathered himself together with his usually humble indifference which dwarfed all the Goliaths around him, and after he had said his say and left, still left them listening to the echoes of what was not said.

'My dear boys and girls,' he began, 'I'll be brief. We're aware of what's going on, within your ranks. But while I have to assure you that it's your legitimate right to make your views about your future known, and that it's your responsibility to make your future, I'll caution that this be done in an orderly manner. We're in consultation with Yaoundé, and there's every indication that your concerns would be addressed one way or another. Your future is in your hands, as we say may be too often, so don't destroy it. But you must start with the most essential step now. Break up into groups of ten or so, and go to the various classes and make a list of the students' grievances. We'll reconcile these within the next forty-eight hours and make them part of our demands to the governor.'

They left and the upper-sixths, supervised by Apouh and Rarh, dispersed into the lower classes and gathered copious lists of grievances that could have paved the streets for a triumphal entry

for the Governor. The SP was absent from school that day and his assistant was delirious with anxiety, what if he failed, now that emotions were rushing toward the sky? He was opposed to the poster-brandishing sentiments that were fuelled by the Ache-Head gossips of what had been announced over the radio. He was also a Catholic and pragmatism was second nature to his ethical comportment. He had been the best shorthand student in his secondary school class and won awards for his ability to transform verbal utterances into scratchy bits of nonsense within seconds. Now he was at the crossroads of his ability to transcribe meaning into invisible trails of students' grumbling. His knuckles were sore with knuckling his forehead, the black-Bitzer Monk as Ache-Head once described his conformist insistence that order was the backbone of every community, even that of students. He clasped the pile of grievances under his armpit and mounted the stairs to the Principal's office, two at a time. Not a superstitious man, he was thinking, what if His Excellency the Governor's official feet could transform wrinkled faces into smiling visages, and appease the students' strangled voices into a chorus of hope, would the thundering gods of Aghem then hold their fiery rage?

Yet, heavy clouds hung over the campus gathered from the students' brows; the corridors darkened and the unspoken password was that 'any man for himself, God for us all.' Gradually, whispered evidence spewed from lip to lip and countered whatever was said from the office.

The Ache-Headers were derailing the official wagon, sowing rebellious seeds into the minds of the students. What was to be done with the grievances, they wondered, and their worry rippled along the corridors and through the classes, and a bloody standoff was eminent. Apouh sneaked around and whispered his own impressions, but only received insults in return. Before long, the students were all agreed, more or less, that their lists of grievances would only feed the official trashcan and convenient answers would be contrived by the authorities, and then what next? The Ache-Head was the oracle, and who doubted its vision, especially as no one knew how the letter from Yaoundé, which every student already knew by heart, first arrived Aghem.

From his window, the Principal saw the darkening clouds covering every lane of the hilly campus and smiled at the blindness of the official buffoonery which he represented. He gathered a few papers into his briefcase and without any formal announcement, his rear lights soon vanished through the gates. Reading the unofficial text without exchanging notes, the VPs followed. Nchinda who had been hovering around the administrative block informed the others of the developments. Neba went to Rarh's assistants to know what they were to do and they simply replied 'do your job' and left also. Now there was a clash of authority, as to whether or not there should be a strike, and because the vice SP opposed any precipitated action, he was deposed instantly and was to be out of office, together with his senior, for the duration of the strike. Within minutes, they agreed to invade the town and make their point. But first, roadblocks had to be set up and for that there was abundant material; the left-over building stones by the gate within the college barbed wire were hurled onto the road and before long passage even on foot was impossible. That way, they boasted, Mister Governor who had the rare privilege of using the eighty kilometre highway alone that day would be forced to stop even if he attempted any tricks.

Then the march on the town started; they were to rouse all schools and mobilise their students to give the Governor a befitting welcome to town by the time he returned from the periphery. But the police and gendarmes were alerted as the riotous bunch cut across town chanting patriotic obscenities. Boots clicked and batons were wielded in pursuit, to overtake the students before they reach their intended destination, according to intelligence, the SDO's residence. That was a decoy, which Ndibabonga had suggested at the last minute, resulting from a mathematical calculation of Richard Hannay's theory according to which the escapee devices a false lead and then does a ninety degrees rotation to the point of departure. They made their way through the Community Hall up the slope, aware that the forces of law and order truck would groan along the main highway, and then branched off the shoulder of the slope into a footpath broad enough take three pairs of shoulders in a horizontal line. The authorities of the other schools did not wait for the rioters to approach them and released their students strategically, if only to avoid unnecessary destruction to their infrastructure. The enlarged



crowd then forced a path through the fallowed farmland and emerged below the *Alonge* and onto the main highway. Then the police caught up with them and brandished their weapons. There was a smell of blood in the air. Tempers rose and fell and nerves crackled. But the police had orders to exercise maximum caution and they were to do just that. News soon reached the students that the Governor had hurried back and was waiting for them at the Community Hall.

‘Tell him we’re waiting for him *here*,’ Neba said, and the chorus of approval was deafening. They had read about popular movements and the bloody clashes that ensued, and so very soon, pushing against the erected police barricades and resisting their threats, they started screaming, ‘Go tell your master we’ll not bulge even at the point of the bayonet!’

The police boots shifted reluctantly, heavy with accumulated venom ready to be discharged at one go. Even in the nation’s outposts like Aghem, it was not difficult to diagnose the failure of independence bla, bla, bla, now popping up in little placards. The shadows of Britain and France still lurked over the place, the police rewriting a John Bull script while the gendarmes, pulled further away from the confrontation zone, puffed with Gaullist *je m’en fiche!* And the students were chanting songs that reflected the communal relationship with each of the forces, whether of ‘*Mbele khake?*’ or ‘*Chapeau rouge, diable noir.*’ Soon a chorus filled the market square: ‘God made man, man made woman, woman made Mbele, Mbele spoil the world!’ They varied the targets from Mbele to Gendarme to Governor and finally to Rarh.

Consultations were going on feverishly, and suddenly Rarh materialised in Market Square, a frail Mephistopheles unsure of what to do. But the students screamed aware that for once they had a freedom out of Rarh’s traditional stronghold, which may never come again, and screamed at him to take his nose away, they didn’t want to listen to his nasal hypnosis anymore, at least not *here*. So Rarh went away and the female MP came in and attempted to infiltrate the rhapsodic consciousness by adapting her populist logic of 99.99 percent victory to it, and then talked motherly.

‘If for nothing else,’ she pleaded, ‘you should hearken a mother’s words even before disagreeing with her.’

The students were cornered; they had expected to go bazooka-for-bazooka, but Mama Honourable MP for Aghem Division had divined their Achilles heel and they found themselves listening as if drugged.

‘The father of the Province is here,’ she pleaded, ‘to dialogue with you. Do not keep him waiting, my children.’

But the local population had already merged with the students and some of them shouted back, ‘What about compensation after the farmer-grazier disputes?’

Pa Zongkheu’s voice was loudest and unmistakable.

‘Yes, what about that,’ he said!

A new flame had been lit, and the Hon. MP staggered and blinked at the unexpected affront to her own electoral promises. That was some nine months ago, and her diplomatic prowess had been recognised in Yaoundé, and she had been sinecured to the Economic and Social Committee as third Deputy Secretary. But the promised funds had never been disbursed at once, and with rippling overheads in her enclaved constituency multiplying by the day, strategic adjustments had to be made with the hope that sooner or later accounts would be balanced, income-expenditure, debtor-creditor, and the records smoothened to popular nods of ‘nothing pass arrangement, eh?’

Pa Zongkheu had been an embarrassment to the three arms of the State, and dragged into the defence box because he had slashed at the herd of Chief Akou’s grandson for violating his farmland, the old man escaped a jail term and resisted learned onslaughts from the prosecution and judge on a mitigated advantage of over sixty. So they wanted to get their pound of flesh otherwise, and cajoled him about the estimated value of his property.

‘Me too I ask you, massa, how you too fit sell your bed?’ he asked.

No, they were not asking for him to sell his bed, but the old man frowned and repeated the question, and added: ‘But sah, my yard dey like my bed; how you fit sell your bed, my pickin?’

At last, they understood. No, they too repeated, they were not coming for the homestead, and in any case, what about the second plot, can it be say two million?

Old Zongkheu shook his head slowly, thinking: ‘No,’ he said, ‘no, may be one hundred thousand, but not two million, no.’

At last, the exasperated officials had considered every possibility of tracking the cunning old fellow, and decided to impose the maximum compensation of one point five, even as the old man laughed and said ‘even *kobo* no go commot!’ Still they had to do their job even with the unsavoury admission to one another in chambers that after a few years the judgement would have been carted into the ‘bad debt’ column of the Judiciary’s recalcitrant headaches.

The MP was aware of the intricate matter and as peacemaker to her feuding constituents, was careful not to be seen as siding with the indigene against the nomad. She pretended not to hear Zongkheu’s trident voice, and tried to smile off the embarrassment, but the voices had multiplied and a new verse was added to the songs, *No compensation, no dialogue!*

As the politician danced on her heels trying to respond to all the questions at once, the sirens emerged from the valley and pricked the gendarmes into action. Their Commandant barked orders in French and arms-drawn, the men in arms shoved their Napoleonic might against the insane students. But Madam MP stood up against them and looked at the Commandant in the eye and said he should not take the confrontation too far.

‘But we go need small *shpash*, Madame la Depute,’ Commandant said, pronouncing the word like a crucifix across his lips.

‘Not more space than we already have or in fact *need*, Commandant.’

At last the Legislative tongue prevailed and the Commandant looked away and his squared shoulders sagged. The Governor had arrived and was making his way through the crowd, with the police opening up a passage. There was no podium so he stood on the mound of the roundabout, and smiled at the stony faces. It took some minutes for calm to be established and for the Governor to start talking.

‘Dear students,’ he said, ‘The President is aware of your complaints, and is already tackling the problem even as I talk. I must again thank you for the orderly articulation of your feelings as I’ve already been informed.’ Then followed promise after promise, with a consoling addition that this time it is for real.

His collaborators took the stage after him and promised more beef to the promises. The Provincial Delegate of National Education promised to see to it that their dorms would be fully operational by September, there would be a college bus, and two new classrooms. He had listened to the college administration, and was aware of the square pegs that have been forced into round holes and for which the students were right to be disgruntled. The Delegate for Information and Culture promised a student's union that would liaise with the college administration for proper functioning. His baritone voice vibrated across the Square as sentimental promises spilled from his lips until the students started yawning, almost forgetting why they were there in the first place.

The Governor, being a man of dialogue, even of smokes and screens behind which Dracula laughter engaged the mode of no-nonsense principles, then decided to engage the students in a frank talk, no beating about the bush, he said. To avoid unwanted characters hijacking their conversation, the students had to identify themselves and their institution first. There were protesting voices, vowing that the spies in their midst would be taking down the names and recording their voices for eventual persecution. Okay, okay, the Governor said, and gave in, there was no need to make a bad situation worse; the students would talk and they would listen and provide answers where possible. No identification.

After initial hesitation, even the oracle of Ache-Head suddenly coiling its tail between the legs, Nchinda gathered himself together and raised his hand timidly. 'Man di die na one time,' he often said, and what has to be said must be said, come rain or sun. He began by thanking the Governor for coming down to their level to talk into their ears and not send delegations in Meka-*zazou* and tie.

'However,' he went on, stabilising himself so that the devil in his veins began to show his head, 'I will like to know, Sir, why nothing whatsoever has been said about the baccalaurisation of *our* system.'

At the pronouncement of the collective pronoun, forcing out the word at a distinct pitch, a loud cry of 'Hear! Hear!' followed, and watching the students from his vantage position to the left of the Governor, the VP number two wondered which emotion he was experiencing at that moment between pride and anger. For the high

schools had fallen in love with the mannerisms of a British imperialist momentum and consequently endorsed noise-making as a variant of democratic dialogue. Yet, he smiled ruefully, realising that the Governor was taken aback by the query and the reaction to it.

He shuffled a step or two ahead and then cleared his throat. An unnecessary act, idiosyncratic or simply strategic, even when his tactic of talking in circles had been exposed and now he stood there like a squirrel on the tip of a spear.

‘There’re issues for which we can provide immediate solutions,’ he said; ‘but others have to depend on the assessment of hierarchy, and I can assure you that His Excellency is taking personal charge of your worry. As you know he prizes nothing more than the unity, peace, and stability of our dear fatherland and the place of the youths in it as leaders of tomorrow.’

But Nchinda was still scarred by worries and his lips trembled and his premature baldness glistened in the midday sun like an oiled egg.

‘Then why can’t he simply cancel the decree?’

‘Hear! Hear!’

It was simply delirious and the Governor was stunned by the generational ironies from his own curriculum vitae. He had graduated from the London School of Economics and felt the stabs from the students’ interjections like an acupunctural *aide memoire*, which he was reluctant to accommodate. In his dictionary of select meanings, generations and ideologies were hardly bedfellows, so why should he be plagued by the nuisance of deceit, neophyte syndrome of agitation trying to attach itself to a nomenclature?

But the students awaited an answer, and the crowd looked on expectantly.

‘You see,’ he said on a sudden whiff of inspiration, ‘that’s exactly the problem! There’s been no decree and only our detractors want you to see suggestions as such.’

Subdued boos greeted his submission. Two other technicians of the ministry stepped forward and offered supportive explanations, but the chants of ‘No exams with Baccalaurisation’ intensified. At last the Governor made a compromise after a whispered briefing from the MP. He would issue a communiqué on the matter immediately he reached Bamenda, that would be broadcast on the

evening Provincial news. That was assurance enough, at least for the moment, and the drawn daggers were again sheathed with only a few still sticking out of the squinted visions, vehement and stubborn.

One of these was Ndibabonga, whose cultivated elderliness was most fashionable at such ceremonial fanfare. Anxious to capitalise on the recent sense of appeasement, the Governor quickly said 'yes, yes,' to Ndibabonga's hand.

He stepped forward, adjusted his black skull cap that was meant to grace the strike and purposefully looked around, 'like big man,' as he was to boast later on, 'how you be see me ma man?'

'You-you-your Ex'cency,' he burst out, 'ma prob'em is not e'en with decrees and baca-ca-lauration, wha' ever you call it.'

He paused and observed the effect of his utterance. The crowd was amused and tittered, but the students who knew him and the college administration too, awaited the bomb still to be dropped.

'I re'stered into A' f-f-four,' he said in jerks, 'but e're since ma Black A-Ame'can tu-tutor fell ill and left su'nly las' year Sir, I an' ma mates ha' been lef' in the cold. Wha' I'll like you to t-t-tell me is this: wha' am I goin' to do, wi' ma 'xam jus' around the corner, Sir, thank you very much!'

The Governor did not expect this one, trivial as it seemed, yet potentially explosive too. Like the good hunter who never selected his bullets before leaving the house, the head of the Province had also learned in his career never to minimise a fact, a question, or for that matter, a franc. You never know which will fend off the deluge, or open the floodgates of hell. He fidgeted with the college authorities closest to him, and then beamed Santa Claus favours on Ndibabonga.

'That's an easy one to address,' he said, 'and I'll call on the Principal to put that to rest.'

He nodded and the Principal muttered a few words about a number of setbacks that affected the smooth running of the college curriculum. Nevertheless, and thanks to the understanding of the students concerned, alternative measures were sought and there would be some acceleration and adjustments in the remaining weeks to exams to ensure that the students were comfortable.

After that nobody cared what was said or not said; the Governor had made a promise and the future of the strike depended on it. As the students scattered in various directions singing victory songs of their first *real* strike, how glorious it was to be part of the one-day history, Neba gathered his *etat major* into the nearest bar to review the day and further strategize. He breathed heavily and commended all about the organisational ability of Ache-Head. Depending on the nature of the Governor's peace overtures, another poster was to appear on the gates of the college the following morning either calling for the strike to continue or for it to be suspended. One way or another, the authorities had to be humbled; the ball was in their court and the students had the ability to keep on reinventing aces at desperate moments. The Anglo leaders from Yaoundé had given them a significant leeway for their own actions at the Provincial, Divisional, and even District level. So they discussed the contents of two separate posters, one suspending the strike and the other calling for it to be intensified.

As they discussed two police constables came in and spotted Neba in the corner. They talked briefly in *Ngema* before taking their places at the counter, and all what the others heard were sporadic 'of courses' and 'certainlies.'

'Na who dem?' Nchinda said, always suspicious.

'My *coupains*,' Neba replied indifferently.

'How?' His voice rose a bit and a murderous look darted into Neba's eyes. He hated being despised, even by insinuation.

'But tell us, na!' Mongoh whispered; 'or we don't deserve to know. You never can say who is an Epesse these days, especially when it concerns the khaki boys. Are they *yours* or *ours*?'

'Okay,' Neba said as if it pained him to concede, 'ours; the shorter one with a broken nose was my class mate in primary school and as we marched up Station today he cornered me with a piece of intelligence from Yaoundé, that we have friends within the police, depend on them, but not the red berets. The other will accompany the Governor to Bamenda and return with more intelligence.'

By the time they parted, assignments for the night were clearly defined. As Tipoung'he unlocked his door and cringed at the loud creak at the hinges, once more making the promise to oil them before going to bed, he wondered what the college administration would

do if they were to learn that *he* was part of the conspiracy. He was considered a quiet and serious student who did not booze and did not chase, the yardstick for peer excellence. He was shy, when singled out for praise and at such moments felt like vanishing from the face of the earth. But Mr Ntsounsti still had to make his point in bold black and white.

‘That’s what I told the authorities during the staff meeting,’ he said, twirling his red ballpoint pen between his fingers, mocking his victims. ‘They need to know who is who in this place, and make that count.’

Then he slashed at a script with the pen, inspected the result of his action before looking up like a python about to strike, in the direction of Neba.

‘Some of you had better stay at home and perform your parental roles rather deceive yourselves with schooling. Never forget that many are called but few may be too much of a choice to make. ‘Take Mister Man here for instance,’ and he walked toward Neba’s locker and fixed his gaze on him for full three seconds, ‘scratching pages of rubbish in *Ngemba*, and what does that fetch him?’ He pulled the script closer to his face as if to be certain of the fact before pronouncing, ‘zero-two!’

Backward steps, hitting the edges of the lockers, led him again to his table where he picked up the next script, consulted his mark sheets to reconcile the name and the mark, and repeated the ritual of stabbing the paper and ridiculing the recipient, describing his shoes, rotten boroughs that emitted a poisonous film that filtered below the lockers and attacked the innocent students in a studious trance; their chain-smoking habit that left them with black sinful lips and scarecrow fingers with broken nails; their jelly-curling masks of horror and no-cross gutter skirts that squeezed their tumbling buttocks into shapeless nightmares on the streets of Aghem; slashing and biting until almost tired, he seemed to discover a new diversion from the scripts, and looked again to be sure he was not suffering from double vision.

‘See!’ he cried, almost dancing in his excitement, ‘this one is just a baby, in fact fit to be a son to some of you in this class.’

It was Tipoung’s turn to wriggle under his tongue, Prufrock against the wall of intoxicating praise, and wanted to run away.



'You hardly see him, nor hear him,' Ntsountsi continued, 'but when it comes to things that matter, to separate the grain from the chaff, then you notice him; and what do we have here?' The deliberate pause was like a bang, followed by an after-bang eddy, 'sixteen!'

Although the verbal build-up had led the students to expect something significant, the gasp that followed the announcement was a rare grade from a tutor whose marks were raindrops in the dessert. Tipoung'he and the other high-scorers became known as 'Ntsountsi's sons and daughters.'

But if Ntsountsi won the battle in class, he was to learn in a painful way that the war raged beyond the walls of the classroom on several fronts. In the evenings, Neba and the other 'daddies' as they were then known, would go to the bar near Ntsountsi's house and drink noisily. If Ntsountsi were there or came in later, the rowdiness intensified, and they puffed thick smoke in his direction and pretended not to notice him. Or on their way from school they spotted Ntsountsi's kids among the primary school children and then subjected them to frightening threats.

'Tell your father that if he doesn't stop his over-sabi rot in class,' they vowed, 'he may never see one of you again, got it?'

And the boys cringed and nodded blindly before running off.

The following day for the duration of his class, Ntsountsi would pour scorn on the unknown guerrillas.

'Cowards,' he said; 'toothless bulldogs, forsaken reptiles of infantile mentality; you dare to spit into the faces of my babies, my angels!'

And for his next test, the unseen poem to be appreciated was a blank verse about 'our father's enemies' who drink and smoke until at last they get drowned in their own urine and vomit. The task at hand was to identify and comment on the imagery, identify and comment on allusions, identify and comment on irony, and finally suggest an alternative title for the poem and explain why, ethically.

A week later Ntsountsi crashed into the class with a string of declamatory wonder at those fathers and grandfathers amongst you who insult the intelligence of my babies, my angels, but fail woefully to understand their poetic craftsmanship. In the morning calm, with the sunrays piercing through the class, a silence of disbelief fell on

the class and the boys thought how foolish indeed they were not to have noticed, and how mean of Ntsountsi to render his kids so vulnerable.

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In the morning the students read the bold words of the poster: STRIKE TO CONTINUE! ... CROSS THIS GATE AT YOUR OWN RISK! A skull supported by two crisscrossing bones was at the centre of the poster with bits of explosive writing.

But there was a complication. The Governor had made no announcement on the provincial news, and while Ache-Head summarily condemned him for bad faith, events quickly took a different turn. The main headline of the 10 p.m. news was the unpatriotic events of the strike, even when, as the newscaster claimed, the government was leaving no stone unturned to ensure an enviable future for the youths. It was inevitable then that given 'the gross miscarriage of policy by some over-zealous administrators, by implicating the government in uncensored commitments,' heads had to roll, beginning with Governor Apouke who was 'relieved of his functions with immediate effect.' There was to be an announcement the following day from the Minister, regarding the situation particularly in Bamenda. Like the rest of the Ache-Head members, who had agreed to still go to school and monitor the situation irrespective of how things developed, Tipoung'he did not get the news of the Governor's fall until he reached campus. They were confused, lost control momentarily, and the college administration stepped in very fast. Better to ensure a semblance of peace before the axe of Yaoundé swings toward Aghem, and who knows what names may then represent the casualties? So the prefects and a few 'senior' students were summoned to a meeting with the administration and the lone point on the agenda was that students be allowed in their various classes while waiting for the Minister's announcement.

The meeting dissolved into a Disciplinary Council session, and the student reps had to leave. Again there was only one point on the agenda, Ndibabonga's recalcitrance. How preposterous of him, the Principal said, to expose the working of the college to outsiders!

‘Yes,’ Rarh sniffed, ‘a Judas in the making so long ago when that boy started getting drunk on the superstitious wine of successorship, all that ancestral nonsense that should be confined in these holy days of Christianity, but no, you all said Rarh was *the* nuisance, me a nuisance when all I did was see a devil in the making and point out the evidence. Now we’re all embarrassed, and now you look on, expecting me to clean the institutional shit.’

Rarh had never been so bland during Council sessions and the Principal suspected that his manner was not unrelated to the snub of protocol during the Governor’s doomed visit. But the first VP, himself a traditional symbol on whose shoulders the people of Metsom laid their ancestral burdens, could not be indifferent to the spit on his red feather.

‘No,’ he protested, and made his point briefly, as was always his manner of talking in regal condescension ‘we should not confuse matters *here*, in the neutral grounds of faith, and try instead to solve the problem at hand.’

He still attended church service, knowing that there was a part of his soul that attended to Christian innuendoes, but his own rituals, those of his people whose libational consciousness he incarnated, still held the vital cord of life. He looked around the room and sneered at the monogamous hypocrites, including Rarh, whose pants flew open every time the opportunity offered itself and some Delilah snuffed out the holy flame in them, toyed with their manhood in boyhood reminiscences until in a gush of emotional frenzy they crashed through the gates of hell and suffered on its outer limits till the Sabbath when they mumbled confessionals to the Father. So nice to have a God who loves and forgives, seventy-seven times seven times a week, and whose servants and followers wielded holily crafted banners of do-what-I-say-not-what-I-do. Responsibility, spiritual and secular, Chief the VP reflected aloud, has gone to the dogs if it has to be reinvented and justified and appeased with commas, semi-columns, and dashes every time the occasion arises. Better resolve the matter, he argued in his dualistic mind, by not only giving to God what is God’s and to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but by giving to both at the same time. Were they not components of the spiritual oneness so slippery and therefore elusive in its constituent state that ideological barricades were erected to justify

human ignorance and cunning? Better to be a polygamous *sinner* who attended church service but was barred from taking the sacrament and whose viper was always raging its head to appease a harem royalty of ancestral generosity, than to be a holy eunuch with a bunch of brats here and there, blood of blood, but denied in a face-saving show of piety and celibacy even before the cockerel attempts its first utterance of knowledge.

The VP was suddenly determined to fend off the assault on him by Rarh whose Catholicism had gone into his head, but that was his cross to carry. In the end, the VP knew, he would prevail upstairs and Rarh would descend into his lower cubicle to scratch out his eyes over his Hail Mary, and grow old and hoarse on a venerated logic.

It was the second VP, forever meticulous in his pride, who shouted the call to order. The straying voices that clashed on spiritual principles snarled at him angrily, an intruder where he was not wanted, a *nyanga* boy, Chief VP thought, who had been too proud to accept the ancestral staff of his Pikhame roots and instead dived to America until ancestral anger cooled off; a *nyanga* lout, Rarh also thought, whose recent PhD from England has put wings on his huge shoulders and made him feel he was purer than St Peter himself, and who bowed at the altar and then accepted the sacrament, it was evident, still in the uniqueness of his own pride. For the man was his own man, in all weathers, paving the corridors in a meticulous rhythm of his cracking heels, his arms folded behind, and the students flew away or adjusted their comportments.

And he often challenged them, the recalcitrant ones, to Rarh's chagrin because administrative boundaries are not a flowing river and its tributaries.

'Do you want me to box you, slap, kick, and blow?' he said, bowing slightly from his own heights to tolerate the young rascal.

'No, Sir,' the rascal said.

'Doctor, you mean?'

'Yes, no Doctor,' the rascal said in confusion.

'Then tuck in that piece of rubbish.'

And the rascal feverishly stuffed his shirt into his pants, twisting this way and that and stood erect, a painted needle, and the VP nodded.

‘If you wish to fly your shirt like I do,’ he said as a farewell gift, ‘then you must first go to England and back.’

And he walked away in his rhythmic heel-clicking. The female students avoided him: ‘That one,’ they would say, ‘hmm!’ He knew how they felt about him, and knew too that they would not hesitate to stick a knife into his proud heart. For he mocked them, their powdered juju-looks, greasy hair that dripped on their blouses and smelled like rotten eggs in the heat, and made them appear too old for their age.

‘If you want to know,’ he said, reprimanding them for not prioritising their stay in Aghem but instead transformed themselves into idle temptresses, ‘I have a queen for a wife.’

The girls groaned inwardly and wished him dead and buried, with no hope of reprieve on the third day, while the boys cheered him, ‘fire on, make man no run!’

Rarh had received intelligence of Dr Shunfor’s ostentatious goings-on, which he interpreted as both a clash of authority and encroachment into his administrative territory. Perhaps this was the opportunity for him to put an end to it all, and re-establish his authority as the supreme voice of discipline in the school. He tried to assert the fact, and to point out that the collapse of moral conduct was due to the clash of voices sending out contradictory messages to the students.

But Dr Shunfor cried a point of order this time and reminded his colleagues about the issue before them. Rarh fumed dangerously and his bulging eyes dilated. He was suffering in silence and struggling to swallow his rage, but was not sure how long his constrained patience would last.

The Principal quickly snatched at the reins again and steered the deliberations toward Ndibabonga’s recent outburst. True, teacher McJonson had left while battling for his life, but whose fault was it? The man had suddenly indulged too much of Aghem fraternal cults of social affection, hoping to erase the horrible trans-Atlantic memory of his forebears.

On his daily walks, pen and notebook in hand, through the town and village that was fusing in a black and white picturesque delicacy and urban-rural excesses of the primitive-meet-civilised instinct, he followed his nose into the drinking sheds and initiated his palate

in the art of native breweries, a *monkala* connoisseur who was soon gulping litres of the local potion, *nkang* or *akwacha* or both. Alternatively, he rushed into the student's room in the rural part of Aghem and allowed his curiosity to tickle his host into recitals about traditional dishes, their histories, amendments in the course of time, and health benefits. Then McJohnson marvelled at the boy who ran up the bamboo ladder and disappeared into the soot-covered ceiling, knocked a few things about while his teacher rushed out briefly to escape the sooty powder pouring on him, before returning cautiously as the boy descended from the black space bearing a huge fufu-corn cake in a straw tray. He placed brownish lump on the table and sliced off a chunk into a bowl half filled with water and then mashed it with his hand into pappy paste, which he drank and smacked his lips. McJonson was fascinated and wondered how it would taste and asked if he could try, only just.

'Sure, no problem,' and the student who like the rest of his peers still expressed ancestral relics of socialism and its open-door policy that was preyed upon by the white man and then abused by his black independence acolyte, offered the bowl and McJonson suck a mouthful tentatively. He cocked his head and listened as the concoction traced its way down his adaptive alimentary canal, and concluded that it was just cool.

Once the initial shock was over, he became ferocious in biting every piece of native rarity and sucking every reed from the sacred groves of Nkoh. Aghem lore was a mystery, woven by thunder-makers whose brows never contorted without deafening claps from the cloudy realm, after which shrill dirges would be heard from a thatched cluster wailing because a child was struck down to settle scores, or the irate Akou grazier spitting out bits of kola-chaffed *kai!* because his source of livelihood had been strewn all over the hillside, dead. McJonson was almost scared at the virgin mystery, almost aboriginal in its stubborn resistance to modernism, and stooped at the improvised shrines in the market or along the narrow streets full of potholes, where a few coins fetched a whole ten litres of the local brew that refreshed memory and opened mouths like reciting parrots. Christianity had entered Aghem with the same ostentation that characterised its incursion into every part of non-Europe, and hurriedly enticed the people with the notion of a loving

and forgiving God who still reserved eternal fires against innocent children who must suffer the iniquities of their parents. But it only touched their outer skin, not their soul, which sang Jesus on Sunday and returned to libational purification for the rest of the week, weighing and meting out proportional vengeance if the injured party was not appeased with ancestral concessions. Gradually McJonson was climbing the rungs of rhapsodic rituals where admission depended on successive swigging of the frothy stuff and wiped his bushy mouth carelessly with the back of his hand. He shouted halleluiah, delighted by this knowledge of the beginning in which his own root was lodged, and the tipsy congregation cried back in delirious unison, glad to be so gelled, Amen! What ecstasy, what conjunction of racial affinity, here in the tilting shack, where he represented the simple truth that time has stood still ever since the first landing at Myrtle Beach, SC, where the erected stone stood for the world to see as confirmation to a sin that could not be defined. Yet, he was leaving all that behind, memory and pain of memory; for centuries his people had burdened themselves with the scars of a wound that only hurt the more they looked at it, but now that he had discovered the source, why not trough the centuries of pain into a golden new reality and meaning? Toil afresh, yes, from where Dr King and the others left off, mighty legends of his proud ancestry, but this time from the anthropological earth of never-told truths with broken fingernails. So he wrote home for books on Anthropology and even Archaeology, with a strong bias for West African prehistory, but definitely not the type that was concocted and served by ruffians like Fry and Frobenius. Such had derailed him and his folk over generations of hypertensive meaning-search with a sophomore whirlwind of facts discredited and fancies made factual, until now that he could see clearly and chose to believe no more. Was he not going to be the new Moses of his people, after E. B. W., his intellectual icon and star of the Black renaissance, retracing the nightmarish route from Aghem to South Carolina? For Senegal was a false start, conveniently never recognised as such, with heaps of fact ignored in the hinterlands of Africa, where kin guilt also burned in unrecorded history like a live coal, now begging to be resurrected, and *re-membered* as some painter had aptly pointed out with gorillas from the forest. He read her effort in the art column of

*The Washington Post* re-directed through the American Cultural Centre in Yaoundé, and thought it a smart, still questionable, engagement with the colonial question.

The Principal tried in vain to warn McJonson of the consequences of such wanton solidarity, but McJohnson would not allow anyone sever him from the umbilical cord rediscovered in the Aghem navel, thanks to a Peace Corps opportunity for him to calculate mathematical sequences of cultural and historical consciousness. The books arrived and the Director of the Centre was kind enough to suggest other contacts in Yaoundé. Within two months, McJonson was touting cultural history based on unimpeachable evidence from the roots of native consciousness. Dr Ndamikwi, a varsity don, arranged for him to meet with his students and enjoy a one-on-one experience in unsophisticated intellectual exchange at the end of which McJonson adjusted his compass significantly according the variance that accrued from the multiple backgrounds of the students. He was already flirting with the idea of dedicating his book, the first chapter of which was almost through, 'To the Multi-vision of Dr Ndamikwi and Students; and the *Akwacha* Fraternity of Aghem.'

Fifteen minutes of his lecture were then dedicated to the discussion of cultures, and the bag of parched groundnuts McJonson always carried with him eased the talking and oiled the hinges of memory. Ndibabonga, young Pythagoras, became a disciple in cultural variables, and tired of calculating and cracking codes, he and McJonson drugged themselves with the myths and lore of the African world so abundant in Aghem and fancied these in a frame of cultural calculus. McJohnson was meditating and the book that was to be the fruit of his labours was emerging from the tip of his pencil (he abhorred the pen and only used it as a consequence of decorum) like God's own Word.

Then he felt a funny sensation in his stomach, numbly tugging his entrails or somewhere there. Against his initial instinct to see a doctor as the pre-departure counsel had caution in very strong words because of the malarial hemisphere into which they were to disappear, McJonson instead swallowed more gallons of steamed *akwacha*. After weeks of denial he was alarmed out of his senses one morning when he noticed red streaks in his stool that soon became a watery drain on his ability to stay conscious. He sent word to the Principal who came immediately in his rickety Lancer



and was politely furious, did he not warn him repeatedly that a stitch in time saved nine, that prevention was better than cure? He drove McJolson to the Divisional hospital and the resident doctor was alarmed beyond words. The last such case some five years before had been fatal because their emergency unit was down, and the man in question, was a stubborn old fool who refused to be transferred to Bamenda. A German who had vowed never to leave the vicinity of the Farm whose foundations his grandfather had laid as a young enthusiast to the Emperor in 1889, von Viktor Kahn had accepted a native name as Victor Kangson and boasted of his identity as 'son of the earth.' His father arrived Aghem at the boisterous age of twenty-seven, barely two years before his old man moved on; but the two years were enough time for the apprenticeship to be initiated into the secrets of the place and trade, and by the time he succeeded to the Farm, every rule jumped out of the palm of his hand with only slight adjustments for comfort. He dedicated his effort to rebuilding the Farm as a tribute to his father's memory, fell in love with the daughter of a colonial *pfosten*, and was ready for the future. But shortly after Kangson was born the War broke out and so the boy and only child was raised in climates of conflict, mistrust, and violence. After the humiliation at Versailles, they returned home only for the old man to learn that home for him meant nowhere else but Aghem. Every plea from his relatives against going back to what used to be theirs only provoked a wry smile from the middle aged colonial.

'You don't know what you're talking about,' he said. And that was it. No amount of dissuasion would work on him and in the winter of 1929 he left his ancestral shores forever. The new English authority was suspicious at first, but quickly realised that the man was an invaluable bridge to local consciousness and without hesitation he was again commissioned to the Farm. By the time Kangson took control, always avoiding the senseless clash of local politics, and resisting attempts by his English friends to anglicise his name to Kingston, Aghem was emerging into the twilight of its modern state. Until Kangson grew decrepit on native lore and herb, a man of nature violently opposed to the prostitutions of culture, and even on his dead bed laughing at the disconcerted medic and his tubes hanging from his ears, and urging him to go jump in the lake in the hills above Aghem.

But McJonson was not a stubborn fool as the stooping doctor realised to his relieve, even as he recounted the demise of Kangson to which his patient listened in a semi state of delirium, although it was disturbing to note that his illness was in an advanced state. He tried not to panic and invited the Principal into his office.

‘It is critical,’ he said.

‘How critical?’

‘Very.’

McJonson was no simple white man. He almost had diplomatic status in the backward place, and both the doctor and Principal knew that an American, any American anywhere, was not to be treated lightly if one were to avoid the threat of lawsuits against oneself and the institution he represented. So they concerted, the one analysing the pros and cons of life and death decisions according to the principles of *pharmakos*, while the other evinced administrative and diplomatic nuances in the singular name of McJonson. In the end a phone call to Yaoundé was to be the kick-starter, inform the American embassy for their considered opinion before a needle is stuck into McJonson. That way, they would be vindicated in the unfortunate eventuality of a miscarriage.

The response from the embassy was like the implementation of an emergency drill, with clockwork precision of act and time that led to another phone call to Shisong and within the hour the Mission helicopter was hovering above the Aghem Divisional hospital looking for a suitable pad. Even as the blades still churned, McJonson’s stretcher was lifted into the iron bird and securely strapped. Within a few minutes and without any farewell and oblivious of his surroundings and emerging volume whose fate now depended on the good faith of the Principal in whose hands the keys to McJonson’s apartment dropped, the neo-Africanist disappeared from Aghem space, never to return. He was monitored at Shisong for a day during which time the embassy completed arrangements for his evacuation back to the States.

The Principal looked around the table at his colleagues with his eyes that were always sleepy, but as wide awake as a kite about to pounce. The students had long realised this as a favourite comportment of his to make a devastating pronouncement. Often, during assemblies, he would sit in an indifferent mode to the electric

atmosphere, open his eyes a chink as if for a dose of life; or hang behind his office blinds from where he surveyed the assembled students along the slope below, and when the blinds ruffled imperceptibly and he emerged from the main entrance to the Admin block in his measured walk, the students knew the dice was soon to be cast.

‘Our endeavour here,’ he began, ‘is to form you into proud men and women tomorrow, better than those we have in power today. But when you decide to transform the environment into the breeding ground for irresponsible passions of premature maternity, we have no other option but to suggest you move to a more convenient setting.’

And saying that he called out the name or names of the culprits who had contravened the rules and regulations of the institution and they stepped ahead, some already glistening under the magic touch of motherhood even with the corset. The final farewell was always brief and painful and the ‘culprits’ stumbled away in confusion and the rest of the students looked on with pathetic self-reflective gazes.

Today, however, Mr Ba’nfor faced a few difficulties, one of which was his tribal ties to Ndibabonga. Rarh saw the open gash and stuck his fat finger into it hoping Ba’nfor would scream and betray himself. So he snorted at the collapse of everything to do with moral comportment in the place because of irrelevant affinities. Rarh was a passionate apologist to the New Deal philosophy of amorphous national identity, which he stewed into a Catholic porridge of selfless and abnegating essences and posted these in bold letters on the notice board, to the frustration of the Principal who had his doubts about the political stewards and visionaries of the country. Between the man, the tribe, the region and the nation, Ba’nfor reasoned, the lines must be maintained even as they overlapped, to know where the crack occurs and how to mend it. But Rarh was immune to worldly criticism that had no ethical base, and insulated in his vision, he flexed his short arms against tribal sons of Ham who bore jungle marks of doom on their brows. What others saw as problems or trouble emanating from the younger generation’s appropriation of undiluted Western ways, became an ingenious compound on Rarh’s disciplinary tongue so that he began to scheme against such a problematic bunch of modern superstitious students.

‘The trouble with you,’ he once said to a group of boys and girls sporting mini *joupes* and *daddy* or *loko* shirts as incongruous substitutes for the school wear, ‘is that you’re locked in French sins, and seize every opportunity to connive with the American devil.’

He then launched a campus crusade with tracks that narrated the Virgin Mary’s virtues, and hailed these against the problematic tendency taking the school hostage, and every morning before the flag was hoisted, he screamed a litany of problematically sinful incidents that must be pigeonholed. In every meeting he clung to the smallest straw of opportunity to attack the Administration’s complicit indifference, and what was worse, he stressed, was the disgraceful act by some tutors to engage in near matrimonial monstrosities with the female students. And why should they now gape at him like a zoo specie if he took pains to point out the obvious?

The others knew the game once Rarh launched the attack, and Shunfor who clutched a matrimonial root to stand by Ba’nfor, if for no other reason, declared Rarh’s approach as unscientific and grossly immoral, for lack of a better phrase, he said. Rarh’s nostrils blared again dangerously and his Madume fingers itched to shatter the formica-coated table in exasperation.

The other difficulty for Ba’nfor that morning was an administrative one, now that the student dragged in ignorant politicians and technocrats who often take centre stage for unmerited praise. Even with the Governor’s abrupt departure, his successor can still play nasty if Ndibabonga went into one of his fits of insanity. The noose of dismissal dangled above his invisible head and Rarh’s fingers tickled with desire to tighten the knot; but the Principal pressed on a consensus, spare the rod and spoil the child, yes, but also drag the child into the house before scolding him, if you don’t wish to throw away the child with the bath water, and it was officially declared that the boy was to be sent off campus for two weeks.

The suspension notice drew an immediate crowd to the board instigated by Apouh, who was jubilant that one of his tormentors was knocked out. He wanted to know from Rarh why it was not announced publicly in front of the school assembly to which the

old mentor replied simply, 'tribal considerations, you know.' But Apouh whispered to other prefects and the classrooms became patches of a wilderness ignited by Apouh's mass servant flame.

'M-ma man,' Ndibabonga said, pulled there by the raging flames, 'you ... you see w-wha' these pipou ha' done, na?'

He shook his head and laughed sarcastically. He never expressed anger and instead laughed brokenly like a man deranged when expected to scream and knock a wall down with his head. He inclined his head to the left and sighed.

'Na nothing, y-you see n-n-na!'

That was his declaration of victory against 'tha' Ba'nfor and yi gang, m-ma own co-contri man, you see n-na!' Then added as a philosophical afterthought, 'Is ma-man's man tha' kills ma-man, h-how you s-see?'

And shrugged.

For the next one week, the school was in a sleep-walking state, everything lapsed into a drowsy nonchalance. Some tutors dashed to Yaoundé to chase files, having used non-advancement for too long as an alibi against the landlord's monthly threats, and then promised a bazaar, just wait and see, when the arrears shall go through. Meanwhile the students discussed the strike and its casualties, and Ndibabonga was called the cricket that sits on a hill and invites its own death. Ache-Head too had advisedly gone underground until things cooled off; there was no need for more crickets to be crushed by the administrative boots. They were in touch with Bamenda and monitored the national and provincial radio stations for any tell-tales. One way or another they would resurface, separate truth from falsehood; it was not yet the moment to lay down the sword and shield by the river, the letter from Yaoundé had concluded. So although no one had answers to issues at stake, everyone seemed to have a minute by minute account of what had transpired in every meeting since the strike started. Three university student leaders had been detained and Bamenda had gone amok with a frenzy of demonstrations never before observed in the country. The hudlums of Matta Horn had invaded the place under the nose of the security agents and turned every institution inside-out. The vibration reached Aghem naturally, and everyday the people woke up with the same question on their lips, 'They don

cancel that *their* rubbish from Yaoundé?’ And as always, the answer was not yet, and *akwacha* mugs clashed in the toast that was to be their children’s, and they started referring to Yaoundé as the Egypt of their woes, and the songs followed, for the new Pharaoh’s ears, to ‘let *our* people go!’ Where was their Moses, they wailed, to go down and tell Pharaoh just that!

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Ndibabonga returned to school even more arrogant and daring; his pride had soared and everyone agreed that the authorities had acted out of desperation. Ndibabonga pulled at his goatee, adjusted his skull cap, and fed his audience what they wished for.

‘Wha’ do they think ah-ah’m?’ he boasted, tugging at his chin; ‘ma m-man, I spen’ time in A-ala’mb’ly wi’ the bes’ o’ the-the bes.”

But Rarh sneaked up from behind the class, always sniffing nuisance, and the students groaned inwardly.

‘The devil’s castle,’ he said, ‘is often erected in idle minds. As for you, young man,’ and Ndibabonga cocked his head and squinted, ‘don’t try to add salt to injury by playing the hero.’

‘Wha’ve I done again, *Sah*,’ Ndibabonga said, deliberately mocking the senior discipline master.

‘You were supposed to report to me on return, to assess the possibility of further troubles.’

The sound of authority had again returned to Rarh’s voice and maddened Ndibabonga.

‘No one said so t-t-to me, *Sah*,’ Ndibabonga said in a deceptively subdued tone.

‘I’m saying so now.’

‘Then tha’s like selling a’ter the ma-market, *Sah*.’

Rarh laughed dryly, and took two or three steps in a semi-circle.

‘You’re right son,’ Rarh said, breathing heavily through his flared nostrils; ‘after-market sales determine a lot of things about the state of the economy, local or national. In any case, reporting to me was just the first step for your final rehabilitation. And to think of it now, you have to transfer the heap of gravel in front of form five to the site for the new toilet. That way, in the end, you’d have been purged of devilish instincts.’

'No Sah!' Ndibabonga's voice was already rising in its disabled leaps and jerks; 'tha's d-d-despoti'm,' and turning to the student closest to him as if for confirmation, added, 'or ma m-man, how yo-you see?'

'No son, I'm no despot; on the contrary, very fatherly.' Then he came closer to Ndibabonga and explained himself, 'I'm talking to you as a father to a straying son.'

Ndibabonga gasped in amused shock.

'Yo-you, a fa-a-ther to me, and ah-ah-I, a stray'n son Sah, never!'

'Listen to me young man...'

'No sah, le' me finish.'

In a flash he pulled off his cap and dangled it for all to see. By now the crowd had swelled significantly.

'Matters are critical,' one student quipped.

'True, very true,' his friend added, 'something go happen for here.'

'Yo-you see this, Sah?' Ndibabonga was saying, waving his cap as the excitement grew, 'Ma father gave it to me, then d-d-died. He had five wives and I hi' s-s-succ'ssor also inherited them, see? S-s-so you canna talk of bein' ma father, no! You can e'en aks Mis'er Ba'nfor to co-confirm 'cause he knows!'

His voice was a mixture of vehemence and pride and he danced on his heels and spun this way and that as he spoke. For once Rarh was pushed to the wall and forced to listen, a feat not even Ba'nfor could boast of.

Rarh had withdrawn into his shell and only the flicker of his eyes showed on the tough casing. That, the students knew, was when he was most dangerous, waiting for the opportune moment to pounce on his victim.

'Certain matters can't be bantered about, young man,' he said. 'Humility is a virtue in the eyes of the Lord and not to be countered by tribal impulses.' His voice trembled slightly, adorning a spiritual cocoon that disarmed the gentiles in his care.

'As it stands,' he went on, 'you have no say in this matter. You have to choose between humility and continuous stay from school. You have one hour to decide and let me know your decision.'

And he was strutting away and the students made way reluctantly. But Ndibabonga was still savouring his moment of glory, and pulled out the last ace.

‘N-n-not one hour, Sah,’ he said, the veins stood on his neck and he pronounced hour ‘awa.’ ‘I needed jus’ one s-s-second, and say no to tyranny Sah, any time.’

Turning to his endearing constituents, he beamed self-indulgent flatteries, riding the waves of the moment’s heroic manhood.

‘Pipou,’ he declared, ‘you are witness to how Pythagoras was exiled. See y-you ’n th’xam ’all.’

And with that he walked away with an impish gait, repeating what was a personal code of conduct, ‘Ah be na simple man, ah no d-di find troublem.’

A dumbfounded Nicodemus Rarh, tasting his own verbal concoction, stared in disbelief at the arrogant erosion of authority by a troublematised youth, evidently in need of counselling.



## Chapter Seven

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### Farewell, Matajem

Tipoung'he woke up that morning with a reeling headache and cursed himself for indulging his wantonness too far. With only a few more items to pack it still took them an eternity, so heavy their heads and cloudy their vision. They tore at the cobwebs hanging over their eyes, a bitter taste in their mouth, when they swallowed tablets of *Phensic*.

The bumpy taxi ride to the motor park was his crucifix that morning, sinking more nails in his head. During the September *rentrée* the park was a muddy beehive, the playground for the gentile and the philistine, balloting for those who shall inherit the New Deal earth. The drivers' syndicate connived openly with cut-throat mercenaries and the market forces raged in polarised directions. Demand and supply, Tipoung'he thought, remembering his Econs tutor who jested that the two did not drink from the same cup if ruffians stepped on the scale.

Tipoung'he and Anderiya mingled through the crowd toward the ticket office. Endless queues repeatedly sabotaged by gangsters making a few francs by squeezing themselves into a vantage position to get a ticket for the rich but weak travellers. The queue tensed, bulged out suddenly as if to snap, a brief stampede splashing mud, screams and curses. The snail-like movement could however not explain why the cars filled up rapidly, until one realised the secret ticket point behind the syndicate office where for a few coins more one procured a ticket without even breaking a sweat. Anderiya eased himself out of the line and as he moved toward the corner a tattered park-boy was shouting, 'Empty-head, one empty-head!' Anderiya approached him with a 'hey, my friend' salutation which he knew was as effective as expecting a Muslim's handshake over a chunk of pork, and wanted to know why *that* figure could not be multiplied by two.

‘Hey, *Oga*, you serious?’

Never a serious lad all his life, Anderiya nodded, his eyes locked in the other’s with a mocking indifference. An almost imperceptible toss of the head and the two trudged through the mud toward the gate into ‘Renouveau Bar’ where the boy beamed on the ‘big man.’ The latter, who at a more ceremonial moment would have been discovered hugging a collar in a fit of ablution, was closely shaven and in his late fifties, and was examining the head of a fish that could have been the miniature remains of Santiago’s fateful catch. Near the plate and awkwardly sitting on the peeled-off formica sheet of the low table, what must have been a bowl of *pepper-soup* only had cow-tail bones to show of its previous content. Health for all by the magic year 2000 was not merely a political slogan; Cameroonians clung to it desperately as gospel truth, and shed all guilt of fastidious gluttony, covetousness, and a thousandandone unknown deadly sins into the imperative of individual and national vitality, in readiness for when the Lord shall return to separate the grain from the chaff. The park-boy approached big man and tried not to look at the evidence of good living as you were wont to hear in the health ads over the local ‘Hilltop’ radio station, and after conferring together, with quizzical glances at Anderiya, he was beckoned closer.

‘So no luggage, eh?’

A shake of the head.

‘And two of you, eh?’

It was more of a statement than a question and this time Anderiya nodded. The ‘very good’ that acknowledged the nod was also the prompter for ‘big man’ to drain his bottle and smacked his lips noisily. Then he quickly rinsed the right hand that had been stuffing pieces of roast fish and *minyondo* into his mouth even as he talked, and then wobbled to his feet, a massive presence. *Le Cameroun se porter bien* was the refrain for food self-sufficiency, and it was beyond question given such fastidious testimony. He was slightly bald and his eyes were hidden by massive lobes of flesh beneath the lashes and he had the half-pitiful look of a clown attempting to gloss over his personality with a serene countenance. He shuffled across the muddy floor, and dropped a FCFA 500 note into the laps of a huge woman in the corner who was struggling to push back her hungry customers.

‘So Mammy Abakwa, we go see next week, eh?’ Big Man said, evidently a familiar farewell note, for Mammy Abakwa looked up briefly, grasped her money convulsively, and smiled benignly.

‘Ok Massa Zakia, make you waka fine O!’ she said in a gay, instinctive shrill, already preoccupied with the next customer.

The curtain was drawn on an episode that was to be repeated throughout the day, enticing and reprimanding, feeding and cursing, always suspicious, if you asked her, of those who offered her friendship only to steal away without ‘settling’ her. Having cultivated a legendary vigilance, her brain, her mind, like her eyes, ears, hands and mouth, were all parts of an intricate stopwatch that made her the one and only Mammy Abakwa, who ensured the survival of park lackeys to the urban machine, but who did not have as much as a kettle in their *ntangs* to stop them from the succulent bosom of Mammy Abakwa.

Outside the breezy drizzle refreshed Anderiya as he picked his way through the slouch, bouncing delicately from one slippery mud cone to another. He excused himself to fetch ‘Tipoung’he and their bags, and for a moment the boy who had brought him to Zakia stared suspiciously afraid that his fish was about to slip back into the muddy chaos. When he and ‘Tipoung’he eventually joined Zakia and the boy at the park gates, they walked down the road toward the Texaco petrol station and were swarmed by boys selling bread and *soya* and other school-return necessities. When they were beyond the noise of the main highway, having branched off into Nyam Street to fetch the car, Zakia cleared his throat and spat noisily into the gutter. He looked at ‘Tipoung’he as if seeing him for the first time, but decided to address Anderiya instead. What if they assisted him with fuel money so that he could fill up and they be on their way immediately, seeing the panic around them? Ah, so they were in for a bargain, Anderiya reflected, the man himself looked like a human tin of milk and honey and it was a wonder that he pleaded desperation.

‘So how much our *fare*,’ Anderiya specified, not willing to talk in metaphors.

The eyes of the other twinkled out of their pouches and he seemed to catch his breath, a wrinkle or two on his forehead. Of course he will not take advantage of the situation and exploit them,

no. He too was a father, and considerate too for as they say, no one knows tomorrow. No, he will not accept a franc above the normal fare, if only to defray fuel cost for an epic distance of four hundred and fifty kilometres. Anderiya, who had never been a loser at any bargain rattled his brains and came up with a considerate proposal for a 500frs rebate. Zakia heaved his bulk to an abrupt stop, muttering to himself. Then aloud in a plaintiff voice, he okayed Anderiya to forget it, now breathing rather heavily, how else can a soul shower favours on stranded humanity, eh, and then lurched back convulsively in the opposite direction toward the park. A man of many talents, religious and secular, Zakia was also a man of very few words, each of which could fill a volume. He adored the scripter of action-speaks-louder-than-words placards and all such practical considerations. He was going back to search for more understanding species, looking at his wrist watch, the morning almost gone, and he still dying to be charitable. The two ingrates rushed after him, supplicants to a departing god, mouthing apologies and elaborating explanations about what they *really* meant. In fact they didn't mean it at all, how could they, when they were witnesses to the transportation chaos? Neophytes to Yaoundé too, Anderiya added, pinching the word from the pages of his 'Bombastic Speak' diary without a care for semantic accuracy, only hoping to impress Zakia. Already dangling the crumpled notes from his finger tips, eight one thousand francs notes and two one hundred francs coins conspicuously displayed in an open palm, Zakia's forward lurch lost its spring and his eyes bulged with a flickering smile on his lips. Oh, black Shylock, Tipoung'he thought, as the money was grabbed and stuffed it into an already bulging hip pocket.

'You see how the lack of mutual understanding can lead to explosive situations?' Zakia said and then whispered: 'That's how world wars are ignited, I hear!'

Zakia was rambling again as if it were an old conversation, already peering under the cypress hedge for his car. Where did he park it, he wondered, pushing the recent embarrassment aside with a fury that rustled his walk, flip-flop, across the street and back, down, up and down again until at last it was spotted, squeezed between a Brasseries eighteen-wheels and a tractor that seemed to have been on that spot since the beginning of time.

To say Zakia's passengers were shocked would be a weak synonym for the paralysed state into which they were plunged at the sight of the 'car.' A battered Toyota Hilux that was bruised and spotted like a Picasso prototype, only too raw and naïve the talent, a limping misery. It was the last relic of Durrell's senile decay through which Her Majesty's beagled mission into an alternative heart of darkness was accomplished, now resurrected under a neo-colonial sun. Of course Zakia knew the road unworthiness of his 'car,' a veritable 'death trap' as he generously described it and often reminded anyone who wished to know that Reunification had its merits, that 'say what you like,' otherwise, the hoary traffic officer would have been only too happy to block his way, standing at akimbo, the left arm raised in a 'Stop!' signal, before the meticulous task of painting 'Off-The-Road' in bold smears on both sides of the car. That, even without seeing the blinding mass of smoke puffing from the exhaust, let alone take a look at the documents to realise that the insurance had expired eighteen months ago (while Zakia reminded any curious khaki-boy that God Almighty was his insurer) and the first aid box contained only a patch of plaster and expired iodine.

'These days, thanks to the lubricating sensibility ushered in by Reunification and its New Deal clone, just anything is road-worthy, if only you knew what to do,' Zakia boasted, jerking the passenger door open.

'Drop your stuff in the back boys,' he beamed at them, 'and hop in. As they say, time is money, eh?'

The others did not react, tempted to reconsider the terms and conditions of the bargain they had just walked into, suddenly unable to envisage their triumphal entry in this *jaga-jaga* contraption. Yaoundé, its broad streets and tall buildings that raced toward them on a postcard in Metsi's album, and then imaginatively accommodated their sudden leap, heroic antics for a hypnotic embrace and through that amorous act catapulted all doubts and misery, that was the vision. So much had been built into this top-of-the-world arrival, even the night before, for the benefit of *Chez Julie* 'chicks' who darted across the neon room toward their table as if pulled there by the bottles of thirty-six-twelve-twelve-'n-Coke, and then inhaled the promise of weekly letters padded with a scented

greenleaf or two from the capital to sweethearts of convenience; unending rehearsals of the Easter return of vengeance to correct the emotional wrongs of Versailles, and whathaveyou! And now this limping carcass, the manger of nightmares and not of romantic dreams, and how was the Good News for Modern Man ever to reach those in need of enlivening prophecies, how?

Zakia was struggling with the driver's door, almost ripping off the handle before the door snapped open with a loud creak. On the third attempt of turning the ignition, the 'jeep' coughed fitfully into life. The others crowded in, Tipoung'he first because he had to place his left leg on the driver's side and the right on Anderiya's so that the gear stick popped up between his thighs like a menacing phallus.

'When we start rocking 'n rolling,' Zakia said, 'more space will be created.'

Already, Bamenda was dropping below them and as they negotiated Station Hill Tipoung'he realised that the sensation of being driven along the winding track and looking down on the rotating town with its tiny streets and tinier roofs, nothing can ever replace. And as these receded into the distance, new realities popped up, real and conjured images that mesmerised the mind in a blank moment of awe. But suddenly nostalgia clawed at his heart and he realised then just how much he loved the place.

'I'll miss you,' he whispered to himself, 'but I shall come back.'

They groaned interminably up the Station hill with its jagged cliff-face hanging like a menacing stare. A poet had described it as the cliffs of Golgotha and the audience gasped in shocked acknowledgement and said: 'How apt!' The town's landscape slanted off in coils and turns to a spectacular aerial view that transformed the location into anyone's palm, a personalised canvass that revealed every footpath and *beignet* shack, and the cars that crept below like huge beetles. At the summit, the old German Fort offered its eternally inscrutable frown, the last frontier post before Matajem when colonial consciousness was blurred in a dubious assault on history, geography, and language. The Senior Divisional Officer, sitting in his puffed-up chair and swaying to the administrative rhythm of post-Reunification malaise, would readily confess if asked, that he heard ghostly whispers of the Old Pilot's descendants scratching

the red brick beneath the mahogany-panelled walls. But that was of little consequence since history reinvents itself always and human failure can be reworked into strategically suitable, no, convenient, motives that chant the victor's songs. Ah, the Fort, crumbling under the moss of neglect and forgotten between the moulding pages of 'old' history simply because contractors of 'new' history have to contrive fresh shades of whitewash, suppressing the inconvenient star to celebrate *la patrie*, on the corner stone of the lonestar. Simon Peter and the star and the institution, how then could conscientious humanity doubt the sanity of the new contractors with whitewash and brush who concealed the ghostly voices into coffins of forgetfulness? 'Tipoung'he had walked those Germanic precincts during Youth Week labour, and felt the moss under his soles like a rotten history resisting coffin and grave. And how was he, like the many who read the diluted history of the United Republic, to understand that even the mighty Mungo, fed by the Matajem, was another sorry whitewash masterminded by the stakeholders behind a buccaneer *Maguida*?

Of course the jeep occupants were not concerned with these distractions at the moment, searching instead for the fantasy to materialise from the black tar that snaked itself under them in an endless slither. Monosyllabic chatter – 'see-that!' and 'know-this?' – fuelled the expectation, always shouting above the truck's thunderous shudder. Zakia manipulated the contraption to a stop at the Nkohmbu roadside market huddled on the elbow of the highway, and nearly bought a whole cow. Anderiya and 'Tipoung'he helped drag the dripping lot into the back of the Hilux, suspending their luggage from the iron railings away from the raw blood. They had paid so much for their fare, yet it did not prevent them from becoming *bambeys* and even as they grumbled to themselves, they also knew that Zakia will offer them balms of smiles for their misery.

Otherwise, they were captives to their wondering thoughts inevitably crossing into a fantasy slumber where last night's hangover restrained them from regaining consciousness. The last communion, they had agreed, was to be consecrated at *Chez Julie*, and boy, were the communicants jovial and generous, if saddened by the impending departures on the morrow. The talk spiced the booze but it was the heavily peppered *soya* that unshackled the mind at

last and saved it from complete bliss in comatose. Until at last, not unexpected though, Nishwang and Mbouju, psychic clones of 'Tom and Huck, spat out against the Igbo arrogance overtaking their show, and had to put a stop to it. They badly needed a cue on which to act and justify their hurting madness which had been gathering all evening like a storm, ever since the others selected a table too close for neighbourly comfort and honour. Voices were raised, new names distributed to anyone in the *mêlée* who was impatient with former identities and it was only the enchanting tact of Julie, forever slippery as an eel, that restrained the blows, shepherded the rival camps outside beyond her lotus constituency. Nishwang and Mbouju were ready to be murdered first before any Wakiri trader claimed their birthright. Whether the night police patrol spotted the *whaballa* or someone alerted them (Julie had a telephone, one of only three or four people to be so privileged in the neighbourhood, although she confessed to those too eager to exploit her status that it was just 'for receiving' and even then always suffered a 'poor line' heart attack), it was difficult to tell, and the way the khaki-boys descended on the bellicose groups, *wham!*, deprived those who blinked from seeing the manner in which they were booted into the van, *les salauds*, and roared away into the twinkling night.

Anderiya who had joined Tipoung'he on the lower wall that skirted the lit umbrellas to observe the scene from distant eyes, both gripped by a fever of romantic lies and yet muttering insanities against their disgraceful kin, must go to the police station at once, and wanted to know if Tipoung'he was not coming.

*'Jamais!'*

The disgust, inspired by the booze, was another cue for him to experiment with his French, in anticipation. Winged by the beer also, Anderiya breezed through the night air, took short cuts and invented others, and emerged below the Provincial Hospital gate. The traffic on the road had thinned down to just occasional cars whose drivers leaned out and hurled terrible insults at him, the way he stumbled from kerb to highway.

'Shu'rup, *nyamfukah*,' Anderiya fired back; 'my grandfather dug this road with his bare hands, now you want to own it and drive me into the bushes?'



He arrived the station just when the Police Chief was rounding up the 'matter.' Official closure was a professional ritual with stock, monotonous phrases, and the Chief smiled, self-aware. One of the golden buttons on his blue jacket would not hold and snapped open immediately he released his hand. The whitish netting of the singlet gathered his torso like a kangaroo pouch, and giving up the buttoning exercise, he rubbed the fleshy mound without realising what he was doing.

'No one determines membership into the community, except the Law,' he pointed out as if he were reading a text. The message was clear enough; if that was rule Number One then Nishwang and Mbouju had breached it. Social interaction, even emotional, *ehéh*, must be the responsibility of the individual, who at all times must be conscious of the Legislation enforce. Both parties were guilty of offence here. Otherwise, peace-loving citizens need not fear anything, if they live in a spirit of brotherliness and love. And then a long eulogy to Pan-Africanism in brotherliness and good faith that resurrected Nkrumah.

Mbouju was snarling, and would die if he did not say his say.

'But this was not Pan-Africanism, *Chef*,' he said; 'it was the arrogance of foreign wealth on the indigenes.'

The Chief cocked his head as if he had hearing difficulties and then smiled.

'I see you're not following me, young man.'

'Of course I do Chief,' Mbouju said, ready for battle. 'Pan-Africanism died with Nkrumah, if you ask my opinion.'

'Fortunately, I don't have to ask your opinion, see?' There was a mocking glint in the Chief's eyes that only enraged Mbouju the more. 'Or, come to think of it, are you insinuating that the Commander-in-chief's vision is nought?'

That was a trap, and Mbouju saw it. He knew that the CID was a bunch of faceless men who smoked themselves into every hidden thought, and then make the men confess to being infected, even in their dreams, by the Biafra disease. Nip it in the bud, was the code word, and the men without faces had just the right claws for that patriotic task.

'All I say is that I smell a rat,' Mbouju said. He hated the bunch of illiterate traders whose pocket weight suppressed his rights as a citizen?

The Chief looked up in surprise, his porky face trembling into a smile.

‘Not in this office I suppose?’

Mbouju did not answer and someone giggled. He was a coward, the giggler implied. Mbouju’s mind raced backward to the jokes they used to throw at the beautiful Miss Dwala, their heads under the desk. How long did God stay awake before creating her? Her beauty was simply unearthly, her complexion that of a goddess. So why was she lying to them, why, that her rubbing oil was mere Vaseline? They taunted her, took advantage of her sex and youthfulness, and the big boys even winked at her and made their cat-calls whenever her back was turned to illustrate some physical feature like folding.

‘Don’t be toothless bulldogs,’ she challenged without turning and the class roared against the forward students.

Mbouju blinked and came awake. He a toothless bulldog against money-demented foreigners?

‘No Chief,’ he said, ‘not in this office. But I smell a rat all the same, in *their* pockets. And it has contaminated everything.’

‘I see,’ the Chief said in a cold official voice, scratching his bald head thoughtfully. His nose twitched and his eyes shrunk into tiny pebbles of sinister intent. ‘Now that you’re not willing to understand, I wonder what will happen if I let you go with the rest, eh?’

If he was waiting for a reply, then he had to wait for a very long time. A vein had contorted across Mbouju’s forehead and he was squinting into the night beyond the dimly lit yard, oblivious of the small crowd in the office.

Out of desperation, but trying not to confess it, since he was condemned by professional ethics to appear formal even under oppressive heat, the Chief went into another longish speech on law and order, with a faint reminder about the imperative of peace to reign, no matter what.

Anderiya was beginning to wonder if the sermon will ever end, aware too that a few other onlookers were already yawning unworded protests, when the Chief paused, looked around with inscrutable manliness, before delivering his incontestable verdict.

Majah and his group were to leave by Fish Pond Road, and should please ignore the inconsequential implications of the night's embarrassment. Nishwang was to go through the main gate via the Hospital Street, thankful that he, the Chief was in high spirits tonight. Mbouju, the visibly dangerous element, was to spend the night in the cell to cool off his temper, else, who knows what will happen at midnight?

Mbouju cried foul, his eyes flaming, and vowed he had seen an envelope exchange hands just when they were entering the office. If peace-making was now peace-selling, he declared, then it was total bullshit. No, he will not mind his language, (this to the Inspector who was hiding in the Chief's shadow), and will have justice whether they liked it or not, by any means necessary.

But the Commissioner had suddenly gone deaf, and a blank look came into his eyes, almost of boredom. The weariness of public servanthood was killing him, and as he looked forward to his retirement in two years, he often wondered why he had to doctor his birth certificate by up to two decades in arrears? His limbs argued against his intentions every day, and God forbid his presence at a ceremony that required the usual protocol under the scorching sun for hours. Often, to circumvent such eventuality, his doctor will issue a detailed medical certificate about his seedy constitution a week prior to the event, and whoever had the doctor's signature combined with that of the Commissioner of Police on his side, was surely the second son of God in Bamenda official circles, saying *vous savez* and *d'accord!* The Chief had easy access to both, even if his divinity manifested at the expense of his being blackmailed ever so often by those who held the key to the divine plane.

Still, he was a considerate bloke, a God-fearing gentleman who attended first mass every Sunday except when rendered officially *indisponible*, and who would not be, if he had four wives in three different towns with children scattered all over the country, some of whom he saw for the first time only on the eve of their intended trip to Europe for which, of course he had to ease some document through the eye of a needle and then shoulder the financial burden as the father whose mansion had ample space for all his children? A professional who knew his job to the finger tips, but a father too, who felt compassion in crisscrossing moments of faith and doubt,

love and hatred, and must keep a cool head, no matter the degree of provocation, that was Etame-Etame Bobolo Alphonse. So Mbouju for all his recalcitrant outburst, was to be a special guest in 'preventive custody' and not to undress, repugnant as his verbal assaults had been against the *bikutsi* warlord who clutched *Poubelle's Rise to Fame* as his second Bible.

But Nishwang vowed that he would not leave the station alone since he never came there alone, and in fact preferred to join *mon frère* in there. He was trying to impress the Francophone officer who was guiding him gently across the yard with bits of French picked up during *njambo* bazaars where he was often the *Katika*.

'Non, Inspecteur, même si se pour mourir, pas de problème!'

'Hal!' the other exclaimed more out of anxiety than shock, 'we no dey here for kill, eh, *petit frère*.'

Nishwang stood his grounds, faithful to his vow, even when the *bâton* materialised suddenly from its sheath around the officer's waist band.

'*Vas-t'en!*'

'Non!'

'*Je dit vas-t'en!*'

'Jamais.'

Suddenly, a cracking blow to the head blacking out Nishwang's vision in a moment of convulsive apathy and he fumbled in retreat clutching the spot, alarmed by the thought of blood. He sprang off like a squirrel under threat from a hunting pack, but had left his shoe behind, now shuffled toward him by the Law-enforcer while resuming the *Vas-t'en-Non* exchange. Another raise of the *bâton* and instinct urged Nishwang to protect his scalp. It was just the move the abiding officer anticipated, and redirected the *bâton* to the exposed side. The blow went home and Nishwang reeled sideways dazed with pain before summoning his toes to rescue him, hobbling away in a curled manner across the gravelled yard. Anderiya retrieved the shoe and reached home at 1.45 a.m., and even as he felt sheets and snuggled under them besides Tipoung'he who was grumbling against the cold intrusion, he knew that they had to be at the park by 6.30 if there was any chance of them leaving by noon.

## Chapter Eight

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### Vanity Fair

A sudden jerk, jolting memory back from dreamland into crash fantasies, without having said the paternoster, and then grinding to a halt on gravel, like a fullstop. A crash, the first wild thought through Anderiya's mind and the crucifixion of the dream, shattered to bits and gone with the winds. He opened his eyes as if he were tearing cobwebs from them, and tried to focus, and behold, human voices, not alarmist, invaded his sleepy consciousness. Children, men, and women, were crowding around the Hilux with bowls and trays of assorted fruits and meat. Mbekiy, the road junction market-town where ghosts and humans communicated across time zones and where cultural hybridity was the main currency, without which everything was never business as usual.

Mbekiy and her *buyam-sellam* vendors shunned the macro economics of deprivation promoted by politicians through catchphrase development programmes. Stop there for only a few minutes and you learned what the most distinguished professors never mentioned about the complicit tautologies of *planned liberalism*, *communal liberalism*, and all sorts of *isms* that were usually concocted at night between sheets of betrayal and enshrined as national policy at dawn to fathom an independence self-reliant and self-sufficient alibi. Beyond the customised sweat of *Ujamaa* technicians, Mbekiy was the uncensored textbook of economic survivalism, the custodian of micro realities never mentioned by phrasemakers of our economic magic, the confluence of every economic sector, and true to its resilience, thrived on a simple equation of *over-equals-re* bargaining assiduity. Mbekiyans had circumvented the politician's ridiculous bla bla of a Green Revolution magic and would challenge anyone pouting liberal ideologies, whether planned or communal, Aligned or Non-Aligned,

Socialist or Capitalist, Reagan or Thatcher, Breshnev or Ghandi, to descend to their level, yes Sir, and get practical daytoday lessons for free. Whether it was their over-ripe mangoes, over-ripe pears, over-ripe plums; the bush meat that was over-spiced and then over-preserved to last a whole week and everyday, to save faces, steamed all day on the kerosene stove on very minimal heat of course; or the re-bottled water crudely filtered from the stream nearby, the cork tagged to its collar with candle flame and hoping that the hungry and thirsty traveller would never be patient enough to *miss* the click when the cork was twisted; the re-cycled yoghurt containers now filled with the local taste, and why worry over the twang to your taste buds when a few francs were saved; Mbekiy vendors triumphed and celebrated this by polishing their legendary wicked eye for money, and smiling into the hesitant eyes of the suspicious traveller, vowed that the man who eats corn today must have hoed it yesterday, otherwise he is a thief or beggar; and with religious humility, declare: *no food for lazy man, Oga* because the man enjoys today what he laboured for yesterday.

*Affaire nkap, mon frère, très, très sérieux*, they chanted in a chorus of the wretched to anyone smart enough to attempt cheating them out of a profitable franc, because *les temps sont dur!* Your Wall Street broker will hurry back to the drawing board of Dow Jones logic if he only stopped at Mbekiy for a second!

The bars heaved and clinking glass and bottle solemnised a chance encounter with an old acquaintance from opposite directions or simply the fact that they had survived fifty percent of the death trap highway. Or may be, too, just resting and indulging in a habitual drink and bite. Even the pride of the nation shone in different colours and destitution was a wonder which only a few as yet understood. Nothing wrong with that even when the taxation man from his hideout in Maffyia with his stunted mouth like a rabbit's and overhanging moustache stops by whenever he felt the need to, based on his fiscal weight on the scales of propriety, betrayed no qualms in declaring that his salary at the end of the month from Yaoundé was mere chicken feed compared to the less than generous tips from the Vanity Fair of Mbekiy. Always accompanied by two wooden-faced Gendarmes, who meow-meowed his every word with appropriate gestures for the expected booty, the taxation Napoleon reduced the

state of the national economy there and then to a simple arithmetic of *chop-I-chop*, and *one-plus-one-na-two*, *weti you think?* Who cares, anyway, was the national consensus, verified and consolidated at Mbeki, as long as it was a fair deal. Fair is fair, but even foul can be fair, no? Mbeki, as he knew, and said so very loudly, that Ali Baba and his forty-something times two thieves lived in Yaoundé; and he, the ubiquitous tax-collector, was in no doubt that *they* the people, with their vice of sovereign somnambulism, were right, always right, and he was a simple rural pimp pleased however to pick at the crumps of swanky neglect and await the day the Saviour shall beckon him from the tree branch. But until then, God forbid every contrary wind to his fancy.

So it did not matter to him in the least that every Sunday morning he was woken by the devastating jingle of the doorbell that announced the hungry and therefore potentially angry journalists with their terrible prognostics about the terminal state of the economy, given the way the state was being run, *from the beginning till now*, like the cow-owner who is only interested in milking but not in feeding the cow, and what was he who felt the economic temperature everyday to say. The people read their papers, they said, a veiled reference to their shouting headlines that recently provoked the Minister of Information and Culture to issue a one-liner postscript at his weekly *point de presse* against *the unfortunate phenomenon of headliners and sensational journalism*. The boys were hungry, no doubt, and who could blame them for being stupidly angry about matters that did not concern them, and about which they had no knowledge? Etoundi Mballa Beau Garçon was grateful that his English was a frustratingly limping feat and he only chose to get the meanings he wanted from the Sabbath morning programme over the National Station, knowing that his secretary, who had been kicked out of Sasse, would burst into his office on Monday morning with *Patron, Patron, les Anglois encore, avec leur bêtises-talk about la cauchemar fiscal! Mais, a qui la faut, Patron, a qui la faut?*

That was the question, which even Patron Etoundi Mballa Beau Garçon could not answer, if at all he cared a hair on his smoky head. Keep the Sabbath sacred was all that mattered, and as a devout Catholic who recited his Hail Maria three times a day, Etoundi was determined, even on the edge of Bamileke economic frenzy, not to

amend the creed. Instead, he updated his schedules all over the *Arondissement* for the old and new weeks while still in bed, and woe betides any one of his regular Jagua Nana daughters if she was dumb enough to interfere with another restless paw that was privileged to fine-tune the chords of his nocturnal séance. Time for work and time for play was a second commandment for Etoundi (the first being time for work and time to eat), so great was his fear of the very destitution he witnessed in others every day, and who knows when he shall be summoned down the branch! Thereafter, with an expansive hug that initiated the day's extensive communion from bed to the shower and then the dining table, breakfast on Sunday usually considered spiritual inconvenience, Etoundi directed his frantic effort toward dissecting a grilled lamb leg, pushed chunks of it into his rabbit-mouth before flushing everything down with successive gulps of Vin du Messe. Christ was no fool to prescribe wine to soothe the living, he proclaimed, and mopped his soaked moustache. Etoundi's table dexterity never failed to amuse Marcus his houseboy, who indulged his master's epicurean fancy with the humility of a blind clown.

'For how else is a man who works six days a week from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. supposed to keep the Sabbath holy, Marcus?' he said in French.

Marcus smiled, acknowledging his boss' wisdom even as he shuffled across the room to answer the habitual doorbell.

Whatever the power-brokers concocted in Yaoundé, he knew, the death-wishing nincompoops with their writing pads and pens at the ready, even those who were now being humbled by his table, would always pick holes in the national ceiling until they became hoarse after repeating themselves for the umpteenth time how *les chiens aboient, la caravane passe!*

'Kindergarten rubbish, if you want my opinion gentlemen,' Etoundi said.

He, a simple taxman (never forget that!), was not even fit to be the caravan footman, (and the Lord could never spend the night under his roof), condemned as he was to pick rusted coins from disgruntled vendors who prayed daily for him to have a cardiac arrest. He was aware of their prayers, but then a man must do what he has to do, come what may, to survive.



The converted newsmen agreed. The national consciousness was split, but it was also clear that the simple principle of osmosis must prevail. Why can't *they* be contented like the rest of the journalists in the house, rather than become barking dogs after the national caravan? After all their salaries were paid by the government and because the government was the nation and consequently defined patriotism, the least they could do was pledge allegiance to its policies.

Wonderful consensus, Etoundi thought, passing the bottle round, and consciously throwing in technical epithets that would naturally filter into the week's tabloid columns commending his practical approach to taxation. Whatever this policy was, nobody bothered to elaborate upon; Yaoundé never looked into details and if not of the hungry and angry Anglos at the National, the people will be contented with the researched accuracy of the columnists.

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The Hilux occupants were quickly swallowed by the swelling place that was animated by an avaricious fragrance of goods and services, bought and sold, but never constant. Short on money at the very start of their adventure, and with the stringent parental cautions to cut their coats according to their sizes and always remember that the shoulder can never grow beyond the head, and that the friend of a thief is equally a thief, and so on and so forth, Tipoung'he and Anderiya shut their ears to the whirling enticements of Mbeki, shut their eyes to the chunky temptations, as the long waist-knife slid through the *maguida's* fingers and dexterously shred the piece of grilled beef into leafy slices. Diverse customers at the various stands cried for variety of goat or cow, a lot of pepper in all its colour, for only then will the beer tickle the back of the throat on the seed of a capsicum. The two newcomers sighed and turned away, their watery mouths hanging half open, and after grading their priorities and agreeing that a heavy stomach was better than a waxing tongue, they decided to remain faithful to their familiar menu of grilled plums and roasted plantains, and a bottle of Guinness each for the final ritual of passage. They had crossed the Matadjem, and were ready for no sorrows and pain beyond the ancestral bridge.

Zakia had spread himself across the seats of the Hilux, and with an impatient gesture, opened a medium size food flask and munched from it without flinching from the staring eyes beyond his confinement displaying their pathetic stuff and imploring for a buy. The flask contained a three-tiered bowl which he gently dislodged from the hooks. The first contained his favourite *nangtárè* specially prepared by his mother in-law, with chunks of dried bush meat and just enough bitterleaf to offset the alien spices. The oil-soaked cocoyam yielded to his spoon, and no sooner did the spoon disappear into his mouth than it reappeared, up and down, an art perfected from childhood and perfected with each succeeding season of his sixty-one rains it was a miracle that poor Zakia had never choked in the frenzy of chewing and swallowing. The fate of the dried *mbapndoum*, delicately pinched with his left fingers, as if to prolong the rare pleasure, and fed into his elastic mouth by alternative relays, was also prolonged by a mechanical chewing again perfected from childhood (by which he confined the chunks to the molars while the front teeth shattered the cocoyam in a simultaneous sequence), if Zakia did not have to starve amongst ferocious siblings. Their mother was often away to attend funerals and other social events that defined communal oneness, and whenever Zakia complained about the others, she would reply calmly, *be a man and fight for yourself; I'll not always be there.*

A faint gaggle, *aarhgh*, escaped his throat as he washed the porridge down with the content of a smaller flask held between his knees and deftly opened with the hind of his left palm and little finger. He had often been tempted, even in a surreptitious by-way that would not offend the ecclesiastical core of his alter ego and allegiance, to propose the substitution of the white stuff for the notoriously expensive *Vin du Messe*, but knew that the opposition against him was going to be simply annihilating and Zakia did not wish to be annihilated. Still calculating his steps up the rungs of parish hierarchy he consoled himself that there was no need, at least not so soon, to provoke blunt reactions from those who could otherwise align with him at the right moment. The strategy, he told himself, was to strategise patiently. As his stomach adjusted to the combination just tumbled down his throat, Zakia also adjusted his external pouches and settled more comfortably in his seat before

lifting the thin lid from the second bowl. That was his octogenarian mother's handiwork, seasoned chunks of a sacred philocynic cuisine mixed with sweetening wild leaves that gave the taste a vinegary flavour. *Aarhgh, la joie de vivre*, if only one knew how, and submitted oneself to childhood dreams. Zakia smiled maliciously, recalling his mother's words that she would not always be there for him. Here am I in my old age, mother, he whispered, and you are still there, looking after me. Mothers loved nothing more than the child who licks the bowl clean and gulped his water to grant the primacy of their mothering ministry, and why should he discourage her, Zakia often asked his concerned wife, if that would give the frail woman some bliss during her remaining days, God bless her?

Then he remembered his fellow travellers and stared grudgingly and the remaining contents of his delicate dish, caught between greed and guilt. Greed inevitably provoked an equivocal argument, the type that seeks vindication from avenues of self-preservation. He suddenly became the man of conscience condemned as such by his now invisible collar, and laboured with himself and against himself within the eternity of full sixty seconds until at long last, wearing the mask of a dog deprived of its bone, he surrendered the two remaining slices to the cause of brotherly love. Let it never be said that he ate and did not consider the deprived of his kind.

Presently, the drone of Mbeki caught up with him and provided a passage into the wonderful thickets of childhood in which they plucked smelling beetles from the tassels of elephant grass stalk. Pull the stem gently, ever so gently, so as not to alarm the insect, and fight off the sneezing fit that threatened one from the dispersed pollen grains. Hilltop vagrancy was the prize sport, chasing butterflies when tired of collecting the beetles, before descending into the valley to fetch the evening's firewood. But with the sun already descending toward its home, they must also hurry home to collect water from the pool below their compound before the evening rush dirtied it.

The passenger door creaked open and Zakia jumped out of his induced snoring, sweating profusely, and said in a jolly ready-made voice, 'There you are! Here, I kept your share.' He would accept no excuses, food is sweetest when shared and prevailed upon, Anderiya and Tipoung'he accepted the bowl. But they had to step outside

again for space, and started picking at the bony pieces. The sticky substance was almost nauseating, and they were grateful for the Guinness whose taste still neutralised even the stench from the gutter. Suddenly Anderiya stopped and retched while bouncing toward the gutter at the same time, clutching his throat. Alarmed, and wondering how a bone could have been trapped in there, 'Tipoung'he approached as Anderiya wiped his mouth and indicated at the fleshy part of his bone. 'Tipoung'he did not have to look again to recognise the trotters of an old *ngong* no longer useful for hunting purposes and therefore considered *pottable*. He too went a-mouth dripping, streams of saliva pouring from his dropping mouth as his stomach began to revolt. Only another Guinness would take care of the internal riot and without disturbing Zakia's snoring peace, they emptied the bowl into the gutter and disappeared into the nearest bar. The gulping was vengeful, and the effect almost immediate and they returned to the car belching like rich men, and thanked Zakia for his generosity.

## Chapter Nine

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### Zakia's Transmutation

Back on the highway, shuddering over every kilometre like a last breath, Zakia sweet-talked himself through countless Gendarme and Police checkpoints. He understood their metaphoric language, lip-oiling insinuations that tallied every road safety slogan into a melodious scratch-my-back-I-scratch-your-back equivocation; or bottom belly parallels of money-for-hand-back-for-ground entanglements; such creative metaphors of a chronic paralysis of conscience, when public service became the corridor for charity and the national purse forever remains empty. Even the dullest highway officer was nobody's April's Fool, and how they took pride in such service to the nation, *la patrie*, for which every patriot must sacrifice an ounce of blood. A Zakia hand shake vaporised a five hundred francs note, but *les bérets rouges* would not be contented with less than a thousand francs magical feat. What did Zakia, big man that he was, take them for, beggars? Or he thought they had no eyes to see the bulging contours of his neck that spelled affluence in national colours? They were building the nation, standing on their sore feet all day, and doing him a favour. He could easily be charged for multiple offences including over speeding, over loading, no First Aid kit, indecent transportation of meat without proper certification, transportation of passengers in a non-commercial vehicle, all these according to the provisions of Law Number whatever was convenient of an unnecessary month in the unholy year of our human god, *nyamfukah!* Although the passengers did not understand most of what was said, because of the rapidity of the French with only broken expressions once in a while in English to conjure suspicious camaraderie, it was Zakia's responses that shed light on the nefarious imagination of the officers, when he winked at the scar-face men, imploring them jokingly, *Kai, Chef, don't look at the back of the van again na, nothing dey there!* But Officer

must endure one last look *beneath* the heap since one can never be sure with these transiting fellows from the west, before raising the hammer to sink the last nail into Zakia's coffin. Not ready to be out-witted in the play of wits, Zakia still managed to flex a last muscle, and cried, *Habba, Officer, did you want me to abandon your children in the village chez la grande mere, during rentrée?* Another wink, this time at Officer's children, whose embarrassment was quickly shrouded by Zakia's thunderous laughter. And then Officer must be reminded of the car insurance he never asked for, see, twelve months up front, between the covers of a brown folder, *take a look if you think I no be serious*. Officer snatched the folder and flipped through it while dragging his feet on gravel toward the rear of the car, away along the periphery of the blind spot. The crisp note was palmed away in wizardry and the returning gait was more gallantry, if formal, with just a blunt rebuff: *Why you no show me that dossier before, eh, you like to humbug plenty!*

Having been baptised into every conceivable identity that day and then denounced the identification, Zakia's passengers began wondering if the Yaoundé dream was worth it after all. But when they were crossing the Sanaga with its awful stillness, sluggishly surging along its wide expanse with a frightening heaviness toward the sunken banks, they thought death was peering at them through the lowered window, as the rails rushed by in reverse. Death could never be very far away in this rooted dizziness that created a sinking sensation in the stomach, revolting. The prolonged dry season of the previous year that pushed prices toward heaven already led to predictions of a merciless rainy season and already, the columns of the national weekly were filled with tips on how to avoid tragedies occasioned by flooding, erosions, and landslide. Such sentimental write-ups about the head of government's unflinching determination to 'put an end to such unexpected occurrences.' Zakia felt the anguish gripping his companions and smiled inwardly, and thinking, by this time next year you'll be weaving heroic stories of your daring crossing. He was thinking too of the preventive strategy deployed nation-wide to ensure the safety of the people in case the weather turned nasty. He was a member of a committee of wise men that had been put in place in anticipation, their task simply to ensure that 'such unexpected occurrences' never distract the political agenda again. Of course a budget had been chunked off the national calf

to settle mission allowances, displacement benefits, inconvenience benefits, and a negligible *perdiem* just to thank them for accepting to shoulder such an arduous task. As the three crossed the Sanaga, Zakia wondered how many more committees would be set up if the swollen bowels of the river were to burst apart and transform the Mbam into Noah's cursed garden. Those who shouted the most against such judicious expenses, Zakia concluded, never uttered a word once their names or those of relatives appeared on the list as missionaries or beneficiaries. Remind them of their previous misgivings, crudely or politely, and – So what? they'd fire back. Committee or no committee, people would still need to *whack*, and to *whack*, entice tickling tips, bow to the *gombo*, or apply lip-oiling masquerades and whichever form the creative imagination of the nation's architects decided to take, was to remain forever the lingua-franca of efficiency and patriotism. Zakia was reading scrolls of unwritten dogma encrypted on his elastic mind and for the moment forgot about his two passengers, and was only faintly aware of the possibility that their hearts froze at that moment, they had never seen anything like this, the sheer expanse of the water gently tossing the canoes that were anchored to the banks like paper things. Only a fixed gaze on the receding bank disguised their horror thoughts and assured them that they were still on earth and not in some magical sphere where gravity was momentarily suspended. As they bumped over the infrastructural breaks across the bridge, they felt a kinship with the half-naked divers who scurried about like huge ants, disappeared into the water and reappeared moments later lugging baskets of sand. Two or three trucks had backed into the bank and were being loaded by even more scampering ants.

They had been driving in silence for over an hour through scattered hamlets, cocoa beans spread out on the broad pavements and chopped and dried cassava perched in baskets by the road, with the passengers subsiding into fits of sleep, and then dragged into consciousness again by the tyre hitting a pothole, when suddenly Zakia began to hum. Familiar hymns of a self-righteous heart assured of salvation, a pledge to bring them children to Him on high, praise be His name. Anderiya nudged Tipoung'he and they exchanged curious glances. Images of sprouting street-corner congregations with screaming preachers and fainting worshippers succumbing to the Holy Spirit, flashed through Tipoung'he's mind. He remembered

his days at the Academy when he had been a regular churchgoer although he never considered matters of faith seriously, a churchgoer who still had *his* beliefs, and was contented with the peace to which he submitted himself between Sunday and Tuesday, and began to experiment with his own brand of spiritual *ism* in Aghem. Then he started hearing other voices planting question marks at the end of statements he had taken for granted on Sunday, and had told himself that part of his stay in Yaoundé was to seek answers to the emphasis in punctuation. Now, all of a sudden, at the crossroads of his dreams, Zakia was personifying the one lesson on which the church thrived generally, namely, to bid the preacher's preaching, and not his deeds. The rich man and his heaven for which, while still on earth, the wealth of conscience, no matter how procured, must be pinched for offertory every Sunday may be as divine bribe for admittance into the gates of St Peter; the hippopotamus and the eye of the needle, such a beast threading a magical ascendancy away from the miasmal mist of pecuniary dread. Jerusalem my happy home, wherever that is, on earth or in heaven, where the soul lapses in the perfection of rest. And the good Lord who helps those who help themselves because it was evident that the end justifies the means, no? Zakia's humming continued, punctuated by the rhythmic tapping of his fingers on the steering wheel. At times clear words, briefly, requesting the Lord to send me, and I shall do 'Thy will. Otherwise, a swooning seizure, pure gibberish, the type that the possessed parishioners exhibit at the point of a testimony, fuming at the mouth.

*Aratatata tchah-voom! Ayeye bangerene to chopping to God to promise to Cameroes to London abé ngeh que?*

Spiritual rubbish.

Heavy breathing to the hooting ululation of the awaiting congregation, a miracle from heaven in showers of fire, droplets of the benediction, for thou anointed of the Lord, go ye forth and spread the Word, so says Zakia, chosen shepherd of the Lord.

'Hey, are you believers?'

A thunder-clap from holy mount nowhere, and the car stumbled on its sheer spiritual energy in jerks, and coughed, apparently rocked by the vibration, but addressed to no one in particular though. So no answer for the moment, and in the aftermath tremors mutely banging the earlobes, a tense awkwardness in the confined space.



Another thunder-clap like the doorbell of the Apocalypse, this time to 'Tipoung'he directly, an easy prey of proximity.

'Sure, I go to church.'

Was there any reason to sound so distant and non-committal? Spiritual vicissitudes have their way of snuggling into unknown territory, conquering Thomases, even vindicating Peter before the cockcrow, and Zakia was an expert at both.

So 'Tipoung'he's pagan commitment, for what else could it be ever since his classmates had diagnosed the parasitic strain in his spiritual *ism*, was most remote from Zakia's sermonic membrane and he rallied his armour for battle.

'Have you not heard,' he declared coyly, 'of the danger of acknowledging salvation be casual accreditation?'

Then a boring informal sermon about how the church and church-going were decadent roadblocks to man's need of the Lord, the traditionalist's stratagem of conscripting His sheep to the shackles of wooden things in halleluiahs disguises every Sunday. Fortunately, a new dawn was breaking in which the False Prophet, the Prostitute, and the horned fellow with a tail who screams God above any other voice would be put to shame. Church-going is a prostituting act, but belief is commitment, dedication, total surrender if you like.

Tiresome *blablabla*, the mechanical conjunction of speech that kills faith itself, 'Tipoung'he thought. If only Zakia knew, if only, that he, 'Tipoung'he, had prostituted himself already with adulation until in the end he had yawned in embarrassment as humans positioned ideologies against God! In the end he had dutifully beaten the divine dust off his feet as per Christ's own prescription, and sought his peace where there was peace. How was he to explain to this ambiguous apostle struggling with the steering wheel that at the age of ten his aunt thought that he was possessed by evil spirits because he refused going to 'the house of God' all of a sudden simply because he was tired of going there and not seeing God.

'Every Sunday we go there,' he had complained brushing the back hand across his running nose, 'but I don't see God, only preacher Nicotindzor. But you call it the house of God.'

His aunt had stared, suddenly lost for words, and only managed to say that the preacher was only a servant whose duty it was to guide them toward their proper seat on that day, but if 'Tipoung'he

continued in such manner, no one would doubt his place on the left, not the right hand of God. Many years after that, he was again listening to *that* conceding voice that had made him to hate his left hand, different in context, yes, but not in content. What he didn't know then was Zakia's legendary patience when working on a potential convert. Slowly wins the race, was his opening statement to his practising evangelists whose rash enthusiasm often spilled over some polished boot and earned the wrath and denunciation of a potential 'donor.'

If only Tipoung he were to be told that Zakia lived by examples, and proclaimed himself as the ultimate to be emulated, then he would have thought twice before bargaining indifference. A meekly habit which he had cultivated from childhood, whether of surrendering his piece of meat to *open-eye* brothers or submitting to the rigours of *tie-heart* disinterest in the steaming pot, had inspired his mother to hurry to their local pastor and recommended her boy for the work of the Lord. When he sang in Sunday school he felt God in the very lyrics, the veins in his neck bulged with passion, his soul melted away from him and then returned home in a mist of suffocating comfort.

*We are the Wai-Pees,  
We the Young Presbyterians,  
Our motto is Everything with Christ,  
Our motto is Everything with Christ!*

Hilarious scouts of the Lord, vigorous fighters of the future, and the promise, personified by Zakia. From a YP member, he soon migrated to the humble position as mentor after just three years, and then into the Christian Youth Fellowship and with that, almost predictably, his elevation to group leader: such excellent credentials that mocked seminarians freshly oozing with divine inspiration, when in plain talk of local colour young Zakia could break down the coded gospel in palatable bits of childish lore, feeding hungry attentive minds. Several capacities offered themselves and were accepted, and in the end he would be Zonal Coordinator, the Lord's Small-no-bi-Sick. His mother embraced him, prepared his favourite dish and basked in the sunshine of a son who, now sixteen, never forgot his duties to her and his father. She never had to ask, *how am*

*I going to do this or that?* Rather, she admired him in wonder, realising what had changed, and piped out, *how did you fit that cupboard bottom, son?* The particular piece of furniture had been limping for only a few days after collapsing under the weight of too much sibling mine, yours, and ours, and after the structural tragedy, they started pointing fingers about yours not mine that was to blame for the devastating blow. In which case, naturally, all eyes turned to Zakia for remedy, his first steps toward the anticipated walk on the sea and because there was not even an iota of sea water in Tibo, he braced himself to confront the Devil's temptation from the heights of the peaky ranges. But he must leave Tibo and pursue bigger dreams.

In high school he was full of high sentences and his mates cheered his speculative ascendancy toward Oxford clerkhood as far as that was possible beyond the ominously grey ranges of Ala'mbeliy, proud to be one of the few to be where many longed to be. Enthused by his own visions, and spurred on by peer accolade he read his Eliot with a religious passion that almost frightened poor Mr Ngwa out of his own pedagogic convictions, especially when the boy suddenly lapsed into abstract enactments of spiritual meaning. He almost kissed the verses off the very pages into his own soul, and wondered how men could still refuse to heed the alarm bells of a wasteland doom tolling from page to page!

One day after the third term exam when the scripts were being distributed, Zakia caused a stir in class. Mr Ngwa was returning the scripts and paused to make a comment or two before handing it to the student.

'Zakia,' he said, 'you may wish to reconsider the use of high-sounding terms in your paper.'

The class held its breath and waited. Zakia, they knew, was full of bombastic nonsense, and was proud of that too.

'It is not for you, nor for that matter, any of you, to describe someone as an armchair critic.' Mr Ngwa's soft voice was strange in the sustained silence. Feet-shuffling, a dry cough from the back-benchers, and expectant revelations from the bombastic oracle.

At long last it came.

'Excuse me sir,' Zakia ventured as if unsure of his footing, 'is it my usage that is questionable or that you can't fathom the meaning of that word?'

The silence suddenly creaked, about to break like a piece of chalk.

Mr Ngwa paced to the front of the class and when he talked it was as if Zakia never existed.

‘My dear students, on the threshold of your departure from here, in all you do, say, and think, you have to learn humility. Your comportment in class is the nursery for life’s ups-and-downs.’

And so without knowing it Zakia erected a wall between his friends and dramatised the difference by identifying the one as Camp Prufrock of the Doomsday Casualties, and the other as Camp Sailor of the Resurrection, with little white bones washed by the invisible tears of penitence. When he was not poring over the verses of poetry that jumped into his imagination with frantic prognostics of diseased humanity, or steering the Youth Choir into heavenly vocals, O Bethlehem, Zakia resorted to a pastime madness after rodents every Saturday (and at times after school), with which to replenish his purse from the local barmaids. Even as he crept through the elephant grass stalks of Ala’mbeliy during his hunting spree, his two hungry-looking dogs, Lucky the male and Barbara the bitch, Zakia never forgot his calling, and when at the end of his two years his name was never heard over the National station, he conjured the will of God at work, to lead him through his trials and temptations. His mission was spelled out in that instance, and who was he to deny it? So he gathered his bag and rallied back to Ala’mbeliy where his mates of the year before wondered what new tricks he was up to, to which he replied simply, ‘In the days of old, my Lord was a fisher of men; now I am a proclaimed hunter of men.’ He was engrossed in his ‘mission,’ ferrying stray souls to the house of God and in the hymns that gathered their trials and tribulations into nought, he prevailed and impressed his district Pastor to nominate him for a two-year seminary internship after which he was ready to shepherd his own flock and so was shown his hill where he began speculating for a plot on which to peg a hut of worship. And thus began Zakia’s queer interest in huts, first to house the students who worshipped with him in return for undefined service to the Lord, so elastic were the services that the district Pastor soon alerted him to the petty talk about exploitation, ‘which may derail the focus of your holy work.’ To Zakia, this was outright affront, and reminded him of

how he had circumvented roadblocks all his life. After all, if Cain was the first real estate manager, what more of Zakia, beloved of the Lord! He was not ready to be a dodger any more than he was an exploiting shepherd, and so mounted his defence to the Parish Council that was absolutely deaf to his articulated vision of earthly Bethlehem. While the tension reached cracking point, Zakia slouched under the Lord's cassock, and conjured little rooms-and-parlour plus *douche interne* that sprouted like mushroom at the start of the rainy season, for the Lord's sheep, and never for a moment allowed the wicked minds making stories about his extortionist levies to a young congregation barely managing to stand on its feet to derail him. Zakia was a self-declared bulldozer for the Lord, and what if he got a piece of land for his own feet while fighting for his God? And what if his further movement to Yaoundé after petitioning the Synod repeatedly for the favour, was forged on the pretext to learn French and further his studies at the Institute of Theology, only to begin nursing schemes for his own branch, criticising the dilution of the Word by over-zealous bureaucrats in Buea? His flock had grown overnight, some say through voodoo incantations, which he didn't mind, and he established his authority as a crusader just as he had been a dutiful son to his mother. So he was scheming to hypnotise Yaoundé with his Lord's balm, and dredged the gutters for his parishioners.

Without realising it, his passengers were already being recruited as potential mass servants. Whether they said yes or no, was of little significance; Zakia had an instinct for the future, and was convinced that his brand of spiritual insurance never failed those in need against the frustrating temptations of the city, when the moment shall come.



## Chapter Ten

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### City of Seven Hills

Yaoundé knocked Tipoung'he on the nose like a heavy-weight mouthful of raw groundnuts and crayfish. Halleluiah of the crushed debris in abortive sanitation piled and littered on broken tar. Almost puncturing the miracle, which Tipoung'he, like so many thousands humming the patriotic lyrics, *Je vais a Yaoundé* beneath their sleek thoughts that September morning, had traversed half the width of the country to hail. The secret code of passage on which their future depended, Yaoundé sucked them from various national pockets, rural and urban. *So long, Bamenda, so long*, he whispered finally, almost afraid to look back lest something pulled him from behind off the path of pilgrimage. The jutting volcanic remains that framed the portals of Bamenda, like inscrutable sentries, were the poet's point of crucifixion where witnesses attest to alternating cycles of life and death, the clash of ideologies, and of civilisations. Even the unknown, geographical and linguistic, could not break the resolve of his vulnerable teenhood, no, as he at last exited the cradle of his childhood and brandished his credentials into Yaoundé according to the verdict of the GCE *advanced level*, tallied and broadcast nationwide by the National Station.

Yaoundé was notorious for a whimsical flair, enchanting and repulsive at once, having just experienced abortive attempts by the military to supplant the darling incumbent, the *shoushon* of Christendom, recently enthroned. Hushed voices that were whispered into uncorked bottles with ancestral foreboding and diluted anxiety with hope, and nodding at the tricolour, O, the sun-roasted patriot with stiff back or raw knees, but never forgetting that heart-rending morning when all of a sudden, the national halo, decorated since independence into a rare patchwork, was threatened by a heavy grudge.

'Yaoundé,' the faded sign in white against a blue background still confessed to those approaching the city from the West, almost peeping out reluctantly from the tall grass that flanked the highway, some fifteen minutes before the city skyline emerged from the hooting mirage and pointing skyward. The words looked magical and exuded as much fragrance, as the battered Toyota Hilux rolled into the increasingly heavy traffic like soldier ants chasing and crashing against each other, vying for an empty spot, under the disproportionate weight of their burden.

Late afternoon, and a rose sunset over grey ancestral hills in the distance, twisting the shapes on the ground, stretching them to ghostly proportion.

The Toyota Hilux shuddered into the thickening traffic, a leprous contraption that had braved the journey thanks to the understanding of the traffic police and gendarmes, reluctantly allowing their lips to be oiled before turning their eyes away from the rusty trap. It was a miracle, if such were still possible in a country where words tumbled out of watery mouths without meaning, that they arrived at all with only one flat tyre and an emergency stop around some patchy hamlets to re-fill the sizzling radiator, disrupting Zakia's spiritual frenzy. Witnesses of the mutating sequence of national pride, enacted like the rickety car jolting across the country, bargaining for profit and loss from highway vendor at check point or traffic officer reading the driver's documents up-side-down.

Yaoundé, the City of Seven Hills, with its dubious beauty scattered on hilltops or trenched in the valleys of those hills, had no need to bargain its fate or defend its status to every *arrivant* paving its sidewalks. Hewn from igneous roots into a conflicting architecture, Yaoundé duplicated itself from its own misery and vainglory, and hailed micro achievements that aggregated into the eighth wonder of mankind's inventiveness. The stars lost their sparkle when Yaoundé waved her gold-plated fingers. Even the blind could see through its *alabinda* vapours rising from the crusted heaps of rubbish at road junctions, the pools of wasted love in sachets and of lusty power, splashed on polished boots, car, and building, and from the avarice and the sleaze of tested faithfals. Drizzle of a dying season and weak sun rays slanting over the hills and a fragrant beatitude, Yaoundé. The Black world in miniature and a melting pot of Africa and the world, of North-South, Aligned and Non



Aligned, coined by a nationalist genius who hoped for preferment. Still, the metaphorical explosion of sheer genius could not rest until it encrypted *la città dei sette colli*, and the haughty inhabitants boasted thereafter of a patriotic miracle in alleluia choruses besides their rubbish heaps, gulping their beer and munching *soya*, such conjunction of a lotus-eater's paradise. How would the flower bloom and bring forth the fragrance of appeasement if there were no manure to feed it in the first place? Condemn Yaoundé and her architects and name-giver if you must, but bless it first, God's own City of Seven Hills and their procreating indolence. On the crowded pavements there was the seductive vision of Jaguar Nana's kingdom, where the Prostitute with flowing unkempt hair reigned clasping her little bottle of cologne ointment, for the blessed and the doomed.

Only don't you dare think you can change Yaoundé, when you don't know a thing about the alluring climates of Yaoundé. The inhabitants loved the place, boasted of its four seasons that rival Europe's annual cycle, but cling to its French warmth when it snowed in Paris, and forgot the rest of the world, wherever that may be.

*If you can't find your bill in Yaoundé, then go elsewhere for yours*, they said.

But none could abandon Yaoundé once they breathed its smells and hovered around its little red bulbs at obscure entrances into which the men disappeared and after a while emerged blinking with knowledge of such sweet fruits and on their bills, stuffed quickly into their pockets or crumpled into the frothing gutter, a rare beer, *siesta*.

If truth be truth still, *Sept Collines* was the hub of Pan-Africanism without a will to be diplomatic, of Afro-culture via Paris *metro*, forged at the crossroads of an inevitable clash between John Bull and De Gaulle, when the surly Old Pilot finally bowed out in 1919. But the Gaullist nose seemed to have sniffed too deep into places that Mister Bull's decorum drew a line, for there still must be gentlemen who refrained from peeping through the chink in the other's door. Cultural transgression, even of the colonised, was a bitter pill to swallow, and in the beginning Mr. Bull hated pills even when they were coated with tropical promise. As a matter of fact, that hatred was so entrenched in his consciousness that he thought it wise to refrain from unnecessary meddling into the other's pie of wild fruits, and was thankful to his God for favouring him with a shorter nose.

With her formal hybridity, therefore, Yaoundé actually celebrated the sleek effeminate mannerisms garnered from antecedents of '*La-France-d'autre-mer*' extravaganza and displayed on a platter of gold for the doubtful Thomas to examine and be converted: the three piece suit and *gandoura* with a few *abbia* seeds defined Africa in miniature, the ever blooming island in the sea where pot-bellied patriots still smiled as if the world was one comic show and displayed their handbags that proclaimed a *je reviens de Paris* weekend spree. And the billboards either sang halleluiahs in French or slaughtered bilingualism for the benefit of the tourist who never thought of the country as anything but a Gaullist backyard. Huddled together over their rosaries, waving a jingling wand and sharing an invisible boundary with the petit traders, a group made the sign of the cross at the foot of Notre Dame because there was only a skeletal Christ left with ever fresh wounds: in the middle of the city, the house of the Lord begging the merchant and the faithful to ensure a piece of paradise with pieces of soiled silver. And there the house and its phallic tower, like a Beti totem, stood with open arms, for no one will recognise it otherwise, and in fact no one cared if it were *otherwise*.

To this miracle of African independence, this 'Exhibit A' of Afrocentric pride that unshackled trans-Atlantic chains around the brain like asphyxia, the enthusiastic steps of thousands of youths reverted every September then to plant and harvest not in the abstract somethingology of Dickensian blueprints, but in the abundance of leisure, short and simple. A fatherly government with charitable intentions, the people argued, and why should the children stay away from Yaoundé or sweat over abstract volumes once there, as long as abundance can make them forgetful? For, national unity was a drug that depended on a generic substitute, peace, for which the Sovereign was prepared to gamble his life to attest to his messianic certainties.

Tipoung'he shuddered with anticipation, taking in the view, as they snaked around the foot of the hills, an undulating suspense of parturition. His head was only just clearing then, last night's hangover still weaving patterns over his vision, even though he had all along the journey clawed at the spectral netting, banged his head against the exposed steel and then blinked, coming around momentarily.

And how was he to resist the lure that warmed the brains even from a distance across the country? For he and his mates had been witnesses to the wanton evidence of how Yaoundé transformed even jigger-footed cripples overnight to celebrity status: they, the miraculous leapers washed clean by the blood of Yaoundé, and fitting a *chaud gar* jerk in their walk, could talk whatever and wherever they wished, and be listened to. They were so full of sense, the sensepasskings of the folktale, it was whispered, and who could grudge them for what was earned through their own sweat and blood, and basking themselves after the rainy nights, in the balmy laps of leisure? They had the green leaves and green leaves meant power in every social department of national life. Tipoung'he recalled the magnanimous claim on one of the leaflets circulated to them by the delegation of bald-skulled fellows from Bamenda whose solemn mission it was 'to orientate the leaders of tomorrow,' breathe a whiff of hope in them and a sense of purpose, that the fatherland may have endless sunrises.

*Go to Yaoundé, and locate your window on the world.*

The students had scrambled their brains for a vantage vision spelled like Yaoundé, real and imagined, in gold letters.

'The fate of your country rests on your shoulders.'

That was the leader, forcing the rehearsed line like his Calvary, his goggles framing the class into columns of a budding infantry for His Excellency's war against unemployment. He had been to Kutaba after his first degree, where service to the Nation was enshrined in a God-no-dey liturgy, patriots on the move, for the fatherland, foreverandever.

'Your passport to the challenge awaits you in Yaoundé!'

Triumphant sermon, Tipoung'he recalled, stepping out of the cramped compartment of the Hilux and touched the soil of the Holy Land with his unworthy feet, almost awed in his submission. They had pulled up in the shade of a flowering tree in front of a huge duplex with Arabian windows. The man of the house was finally home and the entire household was roused in fervent praise to the Lord for according him and the two strangers journey mercies. The man disappeared into the building and issued instructions from within to thisandthat person, to sort out so-and-so from the car, fetch his sandals, and prepare his warm bath. James the houseboy was to accompany Tipoung'he and Anderiya to Quartier Oublier and help them locate a relative's residence.

‘God be with you my sons,’ was the last they heard of him, but only thought of the money he had extorted from them and the *bambey* status to which he had raised them. ‘Stop by any time, now that you know the house, and I may take you to church. In all you do, never forsake the Lord.’

The taxi was rickety with torn seats that exposed springs and brown wool. James was chatty, indulging in a rare outing other than his shopping rituals and rare church attendance, and hoped to make the most of it. He could not say when he will be blessed with a repeat of such favours.

Yaoundé rushed by in bumpy jerks while they fine-tuned James about his master’s fortunes.

‘Your *Oga* seems to be a child of two worlds,’ Anderiya observed when they had settled on the drive.

James looked up suddenly pleased.

‘My *Oga*?’ he cooed; ‘Aie, brother, you no know *Oga* at all. *Oga* na pickin for many, many worlds all at once.’ And he went on to innumerate the worlds, of church, business, politics, even bookman and spiritual healer through which *Oga* wallowed in the hope of inoculating himself against penury measles. ‘That na *Oga*, all in one,’ he concluded triumphantly.

And his interlocutors could not disagree, having been witnesses to his brief manifestations. They had already concluded the *Oga*’s talisman seems to be an ambiguous godhead, all for the same purpose of making him supreme in every sphere, invincible, while the rest of humanity did his chores. As they bumped through the beauty of Yaoundé that was not beauty, the promise of Yaoundé suddenly became a gift and a threat. Every building by the roadside boasted of a bar, the fronts of which were graced by steel stalls displaying boiled chunks of pork and plantains spread out to cool, if only the drunk patriots would be patient enough. Tipoung’he was thinking: if Christ himself were to come, there would be no need for a miracle to conjure fish and bread and wine for five million mouths, considering the flow of abundance along the streets of Yaoundé. They were militants of the nation’s future, and Tipoung’he was to learn with time that Yaoundé frowned on all who nursed unpatriotic tendencies of going on a diet. This was synonymous to a hunger strike, and which was then interpreted by squealerised scholars as

backsliding dissident behaviour. Squatting near the stalls were women roasting fish with carton fans bellowing the live coals into sizzling ecstasy. The *maguida* too squeezed his rusty drum factory in-between the staggering buildings or where ever possible, and dripped sweat and spittle over the spiced *soya* and blew his nose noisily. Up and down the streets, the same pattern repeated itself like a birthmark, a veritably frenzied Dow Jones index for *la patrie*. Some of the buildings dangled on roofed poles that awaited the walls, or had been partially walled up for a quick franc at the end of the month, every patch of land stretched by the Bami's cachou tape, watching his *maison* like his *miyong* and *camion* grow miraculously. 'Fait pour moi,' he would say, 'exactement comme pour Massa Yo.'

And the architect surveyed the petering landscape that dropped sharply into the swampy valley and from which shall arise the miracle and say: 'Pas de probleme, Tagne, seulement que *nkap* c'est *nkap*,' so that there was to be no brotherly considerations and inevitable altercation.

As they swerved through the streets, Tipoung'he began to get a picture of the nightmare, the shape, the shade, and the voice that had enticed him and others to the streets of Yaoundé. The sermon, the dream, the duo that was easy to digest even in Aghem and its out-of-civilisation culture. How could they resist the fructifying dream when even in that outoftheway spot they were witnesses to the University chaps in American jeans and American tee-shirts and American snickers rushing up and down the lone broken street, always looking for a *bagga* 'chick' to hang? Their pockets were heavy with the symbol of their boasting also evident on their swollen lips and needed a sacrificial midwife. Those early days of the Easter break, when holier minds conferred and conspired, were always intimidating as the invaders from Yaoundé suddenly took the town hostage, danced themselves into a frenzy and displaced the strongmen from their strongholds, its bars from *Alonge Plaza* to *Simplicity Spot*. But the displaced men conferred too and smiled knowingly, pulled at their cigarette stubs then shook the crumpled packet for the remaining stick, knowing it was not going to last, the invasion and the chaos, and did not bother to challenge long-trouser blokes who only knew how to spell the word 'extravagance.' Until

the power of the pocket exhausted itself or the Jayjaycees returned to Yaoundé, leaving them to be supreme once more where mere sweet talk could win a man his prize.

So *to build the nation*, Tipoung'he whispered, following his heart across the street, stunned by the rush of Yaoundé, never for once in doubt though, that his passport was to be ready in record time, somewhere in the shadow of these hills. His heartbeat increased and he again wondered as he had often wondered, if it was going to burst.

## Chapter Eleven

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### Saints and Ghosts of a Palmed Grove

Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he knew he had entered a concrete hell the moment he saw the stony blocks that confronted him with a silent threat. The stony awe into which he walked that morning, and he wanted to run back as fast as his feet would take him to the soft simplicity of Mile 50; the neglect and the rot that grew on the walls and pavements like shinning shit. The cries of Gehenna, now visited on his dream, the horrible weeping and gnashing of teeth across halls, hissing and shuffling of feet, broken queues and the screaming of names; then the routine rush through one's file, tick after tick to confirm authenticity of birth, residence, nationality, age, education, marital status, and other petty particulars of a conniving bureaucracy, etcetera, etcetera. Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he shuddered, this was not the place he had been searching for, his roosting spot, and wanted to turn back in denial. But Anderiya was talking to him about his short-sightedness to craft another birth certificate for accommodation, and he too was already condemned to the routine it seemed, and clung to the tense queue as to a live serpent, his foothold into the garden of knowledge. By midday they were through but exhausted and hungry and his heart beat faintly.

They spent an extravagant month with Anderiya's cousin. Prisci gave them the food and the booze as if she divined their problem, and in the evenings after shelving her secretariat worries at the Ministry, and after blocking the entire ritual of rattling her Mackintosh keyboard and filing cabinet from her liberal mind, the talk transcended familial courtesies and merged with romantic frontiers of her *kata-kata* imagination. Her friends came and then more booze, at times for sheer display of pocket might, until with full lips and watery eyes they staggered to bed with their brains reeling after unsubstantiated shadows of the lotus city. Then the list for accommodation in the student's hostel was published, and

having another lease of freedom, absolute, almost reckless this time because Tipoung'he's name was not left out as Anderiya observed, they moved into the double-bed cubicle.

He was mystified by the buildings as they stood like the worst of Thomas Gradgrind's nightmares, giant boulders hurting his gaze. He had seen their likes only in cinema halls from whose tops the furious *acteur* who never died pursued the *chef bang* with blood in his eyes. These were like mini structures of the tower from which King-Kong grabbed planes like chopsticks while shielding his girl. Now he stood in the presence of the hallucinatory world and savoured the palpitating moment, vibrations that descended on him with the effusion of that which blinded.

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Then they were assembled in one of the biggest halls in the Faculty for their first contact with the teaching corps.

The hall hummed with the sweaty sound of familial talk, the *anciens* showing off their knowledge of the place in nicknamed identification of the Department's irokos, baobabs, and mahogany, even eucalyptuses, as the robed or suited or casually dressed dons came in without protocol according to description, and took their places on the slightly raised stage and then cast suspicious looks of condescension or doubt on the beholden assembly. The huge glass windows were closed because the stench of urine had invaded the hall and offered the female students an opportunity to shrill monstrosities at the boys who in retaliation boasted of their destructive potency, which even threatened those females presently seeing their moons.

Anderiya had secured a vantage seat for himself and Tipoung'he on the third row of the slightly tiered hall, and even though they were separated by two meatilicious girls whose slightest movement squeezed them out of position in the tense row and they had to struggle again to have a spot for their elbows on the bench; and although the girls were forever quacking about the net profit of academic man-know-man, and how this or that fellow burned their *mandat* by seeking sainthood in a land of sulphurous visions, the spectacular view in front and behind was worth the torture. Their perfumes too mingled with the heat and lingering stench and simply



crashed into the brains with unbearable simmers of what was no longer natural, due to the prestigious pages of the fashion magazine, lobbied in colourful pictures in palm beachy horizons. Who could resist such temptation, paradise here on earth, with no intermediaries required, to suck from the teats of Canaan, except perhaps the capacity of the purse? And in Ngoah the advertiser treasured a plaza that was the envy of corporate experts still lost in byways of a feuding mercantilism. Sleek or thick, it mattered as nought in a decimal valuation, when slackening visages resorted to the magic cream or spray to revive a genetic crisis and reassure the world. As the girls whispered and giggled, inspired by the friends from behind and then passing the relay baton to those in front, they also picked at the lecturers seated there like engraved Greek gods, this one's hair like a piece of moon at the wrong place, or the other's face like a splash of Fanta against his claws of Coke.

Suddenly there was a hush, the type in which the needle sound becomes a bang, a brief lull before a frenzy of whispers about the Sage, a Prof Emeritus Wirngam Ngaadungri, framing the doorway in an uncertain composure, tattered and out of place. Huge and slightly stooped, his humility affected the hall in an instant, especially the already seated dons who then tumbled all over themselves, pulling and adjusting their chairs, to confirm the fact that the lone unoccupied seat centrally positioned, was indeed the throne of a deity. And such a deity in ordinary feathers, his quizzical eyes slowly zooming in on the hall, almost amazed that he was standing there and they were seated there, awaiting his presence. The girl closest to Tipoung<sup>he</sup> sniggered at her friend's remark and concluded for her, 'Na true, make Pa go rest.'

And looking at him no one would have doubted their empathic concern, but for the high table commotion, making space for him, centre stage. His sky blue Mao jacket in need of the needle at the sleeves, gave him the crumpled appearance of a Roman Catholic Mission boy. He jealously clasped a black catechist folder under his armpit, taking his measured steps in Jesus sandals toward his chair. It was an image that reminded many who knew him of his days as a seminarian, pious at heart from morning to evening, but very dangerous in the kind of thinking that left the Dean always rushing ahead of himself in search of answers for his bewildering student. Their ways had crashed eventually, inevitably some said, and the

varsity apparition had devoted his life, just as he had vowed the day he passed through the gates of Oxford, to the service of humanity. The bad thing was that the very humanity he dedicated his rebellious heart to, was designing its own doom and erecting it as a national prize in the aftermath of the white man's stage-managed exit. Perhaps the only one to see beyond the screens, he realised that simplicity and truth were the only remaining antidotes with which to ransom a muddled nationalism. He was easily identified by the politicians who were only too ready to drag some big book PhD with abstract sentences and fat words into the incarnation of alibis that would shut up loud mouths planting huge question marks on the halo of their hard-earned independence. In his own way, humble and persistent as ever, Ngaadungri sketched maps of psychological and spiritual brotherhoods in the emerging nation, went through the rubbish heaps of the departing lords and dug out phrases and personalities that provided an acceptable confluence for North-South dialogue and South-South understanding. But he was a dreamer who refused to accept the fact of dreams as illusions, and clung to the strands of his sleep things as the veritable basis of an intellectual nation. Of course the politicians laughed in derision, but still valued him and his platform as camouflage to the international community, if only his ideology would begin and end as theory! Ministerial portfolios with no teeth to bite into a piece of cheese were the politician's clear-conscience consolation, and trapped in the university and given the leeway to propose reforms that never rose from the crumbled sheets of the planning committee's minutes, he lived on his dreams, conceived and hatched in conciliatory dialogues, volume after volume, about the state of the *united* nation.

A few crisp remarks by the flamboyant Master of Ceremony with blown-out Afro consciousness followed the pulse after Ngaadungri's settled bulk, with emphasis on the traditional image of the Department that must be solidified year after year at all cost no matter what hierarchy thinks and says or does not think and say. As the speakers said their say, each mirroring their specific tasks to the institution and the students, the latter hurrahed or booed until the crescendo was reached with a cacophony of whistling, when the one and only Dr Takim rose to his feet and started spitting out huge words that could fill a volume from one breath. His target was the

'fresheurs' who must now discard of their paperback Michael West and submit to the blistering combustion of Merriam Webster's in order to see ahead and understand. That was their only hope for a foothold against the tides of intellectual muscle-flexing. The hall roared as the words and phrases tumbled from his lips and he paced the narrow space in front of his colleagues like Okonkwo, some of the students shouted, in a move to pounce on beggarly mentalities.

'The path you've chosen,' he said suddenly calm, 'is therefore doomed in a culture in which suspicious mediocrity arrogates the equivalent manhoods of deities. For when you'll famish yourself through volumes and begin to wonder if it was worth its while after all, your greatest horror shall be at social gatherings, my dear students, where heavy duty personalities with nothing upstairs would be granted pride of place, enthroned on the paucity of knowledge. Then squatted in your corner and biting your fingernails like an abandoned god, you'll be afraid of crossing your legs for fear of exposing the holes in the soles of your Mokolo-treasured *boukarie* to general ridicule. I need not mention the patchy bottoms of your crimpling trousers, with holes at times like headlamps, and reason why your knees must be glued together in the polarised assembly of social extravagance. But remember, when you get your lone minute of glory during which to chip in a word or two to the snorting lot, feed them a jazzy jargon that would destroy their earlobes with inverted nomenclatures that attest to the ironies of your clashing dispositions, even so that those who haveth, remember, must be favoured with ample. Inevitably, the whispers about your ancestry will fill the air even as you speak, dragged from fallowed strands of your existential data, added, subtracted, multiplied and then divided in speculative ratios of night to day; how you were a kingmaker, the *kwi'for's* lead charger whose ancestors dragged Kibarankoh burdens across a land in need of abundance. That's when you girdle your mental *kimono* with a lightening pen that strikes terror into Ali-Baba hearts, and then monopolise the ceremony, and watch the lackey traders bow to you stiffly! So be proud of the path you've chosen though the thorns be pitiless where you tread.'

The Docta was celebrating himself, and secretly anticipated the yearly ritual as a jealous platform from which to proclaim his own path to glory from mere office clerk with the West Cameroon Postal Agency to iconic university don, Sisyphus plus Prometheus and

the hidden sparks of knowledge, falling from his lips like an annunciation. No one dared to challenge his eminence, worked for, garnered, and proclaimed in an *ism* that pioneered intellectual accolades among the institution's snivelling intake a quarter of a century ago, even as the politicised theatrics of over-zealous sycophants conjured an honorary first to the independence Napoleon in his gigantic *agbada*. So to complete what Napoleon left undone, colonised Corsican, he threatened to make Eustace Palmer child's play, and fine-tune Merriam Webster's onto his scathing tongue from folklore.

Professor Ngaadungri who appeared to be nodding in his seat, closed eyes, with every word that fell from the lips of younger Dedalus, but alert as a sensory vein to every vibration in the hall, smiled with pride, for what else should a mentor ask for, the teacher on a crusade, after blessings of such personification of mental energies recognised at the dawn of the institution? Others had come after that with similar acumen, and a few were even then flapping their own wings around him in humble adoration, but none was blessed with such declamatory vigour, sheer energy that threatened the concrete roof of the *Nouveau Bâtiment* itself.

The students confirmed this and the beehive buzz that greeted every statement almost challenged the initiation ceremony. Takimistically speaking became the introductory vogue for male show-offs hoping for an impression on the unsuspecting 'skirt,' whose capitulation was decreed on woven consonants without verbs. Awed moments of initiation, as the emcee jumped to his feet in successive gymnastics, cracked a dry joke or two, for which the students were forever ready, as intro to the next speaker after speaker, chest-pounding personal and collective initiatives and endeavour, woe betides the wayward Bitzer who chooses to throw mud on the rules and regulations of the Byzantine manger! Anti-colonial nonsense filled the air as testimony against an aching virus everlastingly wriggling its invisible horror into the fissures of the island in the sea of turbulence that Yaoundé displayed to international envy. That of course was the Party's line of thought, never questioned, never challenged, never, and forever never, enshrined as ideological ditto and etcetera to the terms and conditions in a long list of titles and their authors never to be mentioned within the four walls of the classroom, and to which infringement was a deadly sin against

which no *eau de Javel* would ever prevail. No one was worried about the no-cross longitudes and latitudes that crisscrossed the place like infra beams though, since thick skin grows very well on a psychology of inconvenience.

But that way of reasoning in the opposite direction at last tickled the Emeritus Ngaadungri, then only an ordinary PhD, into an acerbic protest to the authorities against the shameful derailment of commonsense being nurtured in the place. Common decency, baptised in Anglo-Saxon annals of tested and acclaimed academic manhood, from Latin and Greek caves of wisdom, was the *sine qua non* of individual and collective pursuit, he declared then, and was to go on over the course of the years repeating and emphasising the simple logic with example after example. Had he not crafted the guiding line for the place, in which *Sapientia* was both *Collectiva* and *Cognito*, from a whiff of Newmannia, the ultimate Master?

Unfortunately, surrogates of the French Academy, brandishing the Napoleonic Code and Larousse, diluted the purity, whitewashed every wall of reason, of respectability, and attempted to phrase the very goal of genuine intellectualism with prescriptions of a dying tongue. Without the least shade of pretence, and recruiting the Classics for his argument, ‘the refinement of the commonweal was to be projected as unquestionably fundamental to the rationale for the academe in a continent struggling to define its independence and make it practically worthwhile.’

‘F-U-N-D-A-M-E-N-T-A-L,’ he said and the letters tumbled from his lips like soft cotton balls, a little hardened, or popped corn in grease squeezed through the casing of a ballpoint pen, from the bigger end through the glassy vent until the pressure forced the other ball at the smaller end to explode mutely, *pfut*: the verdict of an oracle, summons of life at the blurred moment of parturition, gushing forth like molten magma against recalcitrant fellows, whose t’s and i’s still stood aloof, suspicious and stubborn, and rocked the foundations of steeled concrete on which Tipoung’s soul stood gasping for breath. He heard the word and remembered ‘boomerang,’ ‘boom’ then ‘rang,’ when he first heard it at the Academy, a boom that rang endless eddies in his head, and he looked around to see how those near him were affected, but only felt the silence of an after-shock. The silence was palpable, reclaiming the overgrown footpath in *pfut-pfut* oration. For a quarter century, the Prof had

scaled the horizons of Negro-African manuscripts and transcribed genealogies of sung and unsung heroes and heroines in proportionate measures of a recovery strategy. International acknowledgements provoked grudging national nods. But he was never rattled, even as faceless Ceeaidiy flat feet tailed his battered Vox Wagen, flipping through the pages of a Baby Doc white book. Duty first he vowed, then judgement and the consequences later. Always duty, to the best of his seminary steeled ability. Blueprint estimations with carefully clipped footnotes slipped off his table every start of the year in a solo crusade attesting to what he captioned as 'The Inevitable Trinity,' crudely expressed as 'a typing machine, a bookstore, and a reading room, Sir, if you don't mind.' Colleagues stared and wondered what had become of his mind, so promising only lately from Sorbonne and Oxford! However, threatened by the lone crusader's monopoly of the pioneering curriculum if such creeping vermin were tolerated, detractors laughed at the beggarly arrogance, *il ce croit oñ*, and hung the lamentable proposals as harlequin dreadlocks of abortive spirituality, they were quite certain of this and said so without fear of being contradicted, square pegs being forced into round holes and therefore only fit for addendum favours after all has been said and done, that is, assessed and rejected. But his students believed him over the years, and that was all the salvation that mattered, the Prof fumed meekly, let heaven and earth crash back into atomic bits for he was also a believer of Galileo, properly qualified. Takim was a pioneer bulldozer on whom he placed his palm and dared his green-eyed witches, a begotten child and staff-bearer at sunset, fed with scooped *minyanga*, and every year, spurred on by the vituperative ironies of his podium gang who recalled and served an endangered ancestry, Prof Ngaadungri sourced his energies toward the enabling goal of the informed heart within which abounds the castle of hope. Fundamentally hopeful then, he concluded, castles of hope in every heart as a possibility, and forever so, the letters breaking through the silence of the hall like a rumbling earthquake, year after a-quarter-century year like now, to turn a new page, hoe the dry farm-beds into the open furrows, the entranced warmth of the revived earth to accept the seed for an abounding dream.

## Chapter Twelve

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### Feuding Pedagogues

Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he was dazed by the fast and the furious lanes of the place, with its sighs and wails and groans conquering the mastermindedness of the dream. For a moment he stood there in hesitation, not knowing whether to follow the swearing throng of *kaḗpos* and get lost in the maze of confusion or simply turn back and deny the call of his heart. What madness in the guise of forming the minds of those who shall build the nation, builders of the nation who surrendered their credentials to a wanton lust to smash everything in their path to glory. But he hesitated, hearing a different voice, and when he peered ahead above the heads of the other students in the dimmed hall, he saw the extravagant Afro flair of Dr Taanwahni, recognised from initiation, claspig a huge volume, page-marked at several places. The voice was a soothing balm, the eddying peace of the after-thunder confusion, and suddenly Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he was mesmerised. The mysteries of Genesis were made real as fruits of the human imagination, while the Greeks and their raw strength opened new vistas into human civilisation, appropriating the Word. The passion, and the sheer enthusiasm of delivering the lesson, hypnotised Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he, whose hand became limp, the pen dropped on the open page, and he was awed by the vibrating voice, an oracle of knowledge, breathing forth new meanings with a new confidence. Why bother to write that which transpired into his heart directly, effortlessly transfused, a good dream at last only waiting to be recounted with a fresh breath? How then could he not forgive the place, and tolerate its nausea that gnawed the entrails?

From that day he awaited Dr Taanwahni's entrance through the double iron door with the thirst of a believer, and supporting his head in his hands allowed the wisdom to flow directly into his soul like drops of Canaan. On the eve of exams he would discuss the

possible areas with the students, for exams he said, were not meant to fail students but to assess their degree of understanding and expressivity.

'You may be expected to show how Greek culture is the bedrock of Western civilisation,' he said, and the students scribbled furiously, substituting the period at the end of the statement with an interrogative and thereafter interrogate each other for possible insights if indeed such were to be the question. But the other lecturers were not happy with the give-away tendency that made the students lazy, always expecting to be spoon-fed.

'I hear some of your lecturers,' Dr Webote said, 'teach you not only how to chew but also how to swallow.' Then he laughed sarcastically.

And the students sniggered in derision, shouting 'Fanta-Coca' because Dr Webote's hands were claws the colour of Coca-Cola when raised against his Fanta face to emphasise his points, parroting Trugil like daily bread.

He was seconded by Dr Chinda whose pride was legendary as he crossed his legs reading the Corpus Christi Carol. Always pliable to the wind that blew francward, he saw no harm in standing by a friend with connections, in case there was a fair gush. He was a pioneer real estate agent in the budding student residential area, and had influenced Webote to follow his tested example, and the students planned to 'show them something.' Why should they challenge voices that sounded like a shower of manna? The following day Chinda stormed into Dr Webote's lecture and rained curses on the sons of Belzebub who dared to tarnish his hard-earned investments. As he fumed and spat fire, the whisper went round the hall like smoke from nowhere, how some blokes had smeared the placard that advertised his *mini cite*. He had written 'Six furnished rooms for rent' and the malicious students had carefully replaced the 'i' in 'six' with an 'e' and added a dash between the word and the next, whose initial letters were also changed to 'ta.' Long after he had left, Dr Webote enhanced the air of intimidation, and promised to reveal the recalcitrant fellows by the end of the week.

Then Dr Sigala rushed in, always in a hurry, and bulldozed every socio-linguistic defence which Dr Webote had raised with a single sentence against caricature intellectuals who duplicate their own



wrongs into the monotonous sequence of a stunted academe. Such in-house feuds, but Dr Sigala would not be silent when his mate's intellectual credentials were violated.

'And I hear that some of them even sit while they're supposed to be lecturing. Don't allow them do that; they're arrogating your rights, and that is wrong.'

In Dr Sigala, the students saw the double of Dr Taanwahni not only because they shared an office but also because as the students swore, they drank from the same ideological mug and spat on the Weboteised cloth of intellectual stagnation. His forehead wrinkled with an accumulation of knowledge in Pan-Africanist slogans, as Dr Sigala defined the bedrock of *Das Kapital* as the anticipated post-independence nuisance of a malnourished leadership, and as with his ideological accomplice, the students were hushed in the assimilation of what they had never heard before or even imagined.

'So don't allow your lecturers who have no teeth with which to chew the theoretical sinew to lead you astray,' he said and wiped the sweat from his head that shone like a brown egg 'with an escapist version of Apartheid because you have Apartheid right here in your own country.'

The students waited for more, always sure that once the Prof was on fire, there was no slowing him down. And then the sledge hammer was aimed maliciously toward America and her impact on global tendencies, and how France, the almighty god of Francophone Africa, was always trying to stab America in the back and become the spineless champion of the West.

'For every bottle of Coca-Cola that you buy then,' Dr Sigala went on, 'you help to tighten the American cord of global hypnosis around your throat. As you drink it you begin to americanise your taste buds, especially the mental ones. But don't blame America; blame your leaders who are ready to auction our future for a counterfeit American dollar bill. Yet, we should do worse if the dollar power belonged to us, given our record of self-hatred and waste.'

He must have discussed his lessons with his colleague because the following week Dr Taanwahni balanced his blown-out head to one side and talked endlessly about *Cry the Beloved Country*. It was the subject of a talk he was to deliver but administrative bottlenecks frustrated him although he continued to gather his ideas and sampled them through his students' inquisitive mannerisms.

‘Every such novel,’ he said, ‘replicates an indigenous vision as a basic requirement. But *that* novel *about* South Africa camouflages racist tendencies for a sympathetic discourse. That book simply depicts the Black man as backward, ungrateful, and demonic.’ Then he chained up on Marx and how Communism conflicts with Capitalism in the Third World through architecture as just one example. The two buildings of the town hall with its fanciful outlook which designates both the leisure of the capitalist mind and the Dionysian wantonness; contrasted with stiff and purposeful rectangles of the Communist vision embodied by the Party headquarters: both are symbols of our confused ideological leaning, symbols of East-West ideological splits in which we are being pulled apart.

‘Where do you stand Sir,’ the students wished to know; and he cocked his head and declared: ‘On the last day Communists shall go to hell!’

The students did not understand, so he explained: ‘Communism thrives on collective ownership, which is utopian nonsense. No one wants another to control his right of ownership, so why pretend? Besides, while they discourage any other aspirants, Communist leaders cling to power until they’re unable to lift the pen of their authority, and how is that different from the nuisance of Capitalism, in its own context? But we don’t have to lean East or West; our own initiative can save the day and the future. I was in Bamenda a week ago and was amazed at what I saw, architecturally. The churches, irrespective of denomination, are conspicuous not just because of their location, but also because of the unique masonry, whether it is limestone or igneous. Individual homes replicate that pattern and so why spend scarce billions on paint and tiles when local material can give us an envious identity? The old cities of Europe abhor paint and even interior decoration depends of organic matter. But Africa is hypnotised by flashy sophistication, and because we wish for eternal brightness, so we go on milking individual and national coffers to pacify our vanity.’

Tipoung’he ticked or crossed his lecturers as they too tickled his mind or failed to. Some made him drowsy with flamboyant utterances that meant nothing except that the female students laughed and hissed and made eye contacts. During such lectures Tipoung’he conquered the drowsiness by sketching his verses, which he would

shield from the others, building castles and posing questions for which there were no ready answers. Between the blocks and question marks he caught brief remarks from the lecturer whose cynical voice defined stylistics in abstracts and symbols, a mystery that only a very fortunate minority understood. But Dr Ngoumbey was not a statistician, and knew that his pay package at the end of the month had never been a consequence of pedagogic glory. Leaning against the table, his legs crossed, he concentrated on extracting huge definitions from his *polycop* that the students must possess and without which they were sure to face their Golgotha in the exams. Stylistics and definitions, how did they gel, Tipoung'he wondered, and read over his sketch again. But after the lecture he went to Dr Ngoumbey's office and showed him his 'piece,' and wanted to know if he would take a look at it? Dr Ngoumbey smiled with the corner of his mouth, why not, he would take a look and after a briefest glance crumbled the piece of paper in his scholarly hand and dropped it in the basket beside his swivel chair.

Tipoung'he trembled imperceptibly, choked with frustrated emotion, humiliated, and felt a strong desire to kill at the same time.

'Don't deceive yourself boy,' Dr Ngoumbey said and laughed dryly, 'you'll never be Wordsworth or Shakespeare, so there's no need trying and deceiving yourself and the rest of humanity.'

'But there's no fault in trying, doc? And then I don't have to be them, but myself?' Tipoung'he was daring and at the same time enticed the lecturer with a soothing 'doc' even as he shouted 'dog' in his heart.

'Ah, I see,' the other said, piqued; 'another Toundi hoping to peep into the master's territory? That's the problem with presumptuousness, my boy: you tend to believe your own folly and take your inadequacies for Fako-height achievements.'

Tipoung'he frowned and wondered about the analogy with Toundi and so wished to know from his professor if Toundi was not in fact the pride of our collective effort to know and challenge oppression?

'That's exactly the problem! Not a literary guru as you know, my humble opinion is that Toundi and his likes are a nuisance to authority, and what will happen to us in the annihilation of authority?'

‘Even authority that oppresses and imposes itself on the oppressed?’

‘Who are you to judge the credentials of authority? That’s what I call mental nuisance. Of course I don’t need to remind you of the fate of Toundi, and you have to ask yourself, was it worth its while? It is for you to decide boy, whether to be a good abiding student or a humbug, a nuisance, pipe-dreaming possibilities that would only lead to your ruin.’

As he walked away some five minutes later with his feet suddenly heavy and refusing to leave the ground, Tipoung’he understood why Anderiya often said there were times he felt like killing some ignorant Frog and would feel the hand of God in that act. But Dr Ngoumbey was no Frog even if his eerie voice resembled that of a strangled frog, husky. He had emptied Tipoung’he’s budding fountain of pride in the citadel, snuffed the kindled flame, and thrashed the filaments that were issuing from his nip, infidel and slayer of his hope. The week rushed by in confused spirals of frustration, and Tipoung’he walked about like a shadow of himself, withdrawn. The next class, Dr Ngoumbey again swung the hammer against him, pulling at his beard.

‘I see some of you want to become poets!’ he said and laughed dryly.

‘Why not?’

It was a back-bencher who made the challenge, bold in anonymity.

‘Why not?’ Dr Ngoumbey echoed as if it was the hollowest question ever posed. ‘Simply because it’ll never happen!’

A cornerstone to the recently hatched pressure group that subjected Fakobay, Kayville, and Tambelah into a bitzerian acronym, FAKATA, partly to displace Graffi oversabi, Dr Ngoumbey dug tribal trenches with his stylistics tongue and these became regional signposts of a cautionary affirmative action. Take it or leave it, he challenged, empowerment was a human right never to be trifled with. During the orals, he in particular, but acting on the instigation of Dr Bambe the tortoise, sharpened his regional claws into a formidable parker-nib that readjusted the scale of performance according to FAKATALISM. But for all his sweat, he still prevailed in the students’ imagination as anti-poet and anti-pedagogue, and ultimately as anti-progress and cynic who never saw a grain of good in anyone’s ability.

'If you're looking for your failure,' he told the students who had clamoured for the assessment date so as to be ready, 'go look for it elsewhere, not from me.' So the students looked elsewhere and discovered plenty of de-regionalised porridge that nourished them forward after a massive boycott of Sir Ngombey's stylistics during exams.

As he breathed abstract stylistics sentences without meaning, Tipoung'he schemed to expose him. He had looked up a casual Soyinka poem in an anthology and scribbled it on a sheet of paper with a conspicuous signature at the end, *Tipoung'he*. Then he pushed it across the bench to Enow who glanced at it and whispered fiercely, 'plagiarism!'

'No, not that,' Tipoung'he whispered back; 'a trap.'

Soon Enow was in the know and savagely ripped a sheet from his folder on which he copied one of his own poems with an ostentatious signature, *W. Soyinka*. This he pushed back to Tipoung'he with a note, 'Take both to him and see how he'll laugh with the wrong side of his mouth.'

After the lecture Tipoung'he followed Dr Ngombey to the office and on seeing the familiar face the lecturer smiled condescendingly.

'What now, my young man?' A streak of impatience that was malice still violated his attempt to sound amiable.

'We were given a tutorial assignment,' Tipoung'he said, 'to write a poem inspired by Soyinka's and I was wondering if you could glance at my draft before I do a final copy.'

'Whose idea was this?'

Tipoung'he was alarmed, but quickly regained his composure, understanding.

'Dr Taanwahni's Sir,' he said.

'I see,' the lecturer said, reading both poems at arm length, having fastened his glasses to his nose. 'You can see the difference a mile away, considering the rhythm and overall fluency in Soyinka's. But you're still caught in the abstraction of your own fancy. Water it down, boy, to make sense, if you hope to have a mark for all your labour. Poetry is not a jumble of stony sentences broken down mechanically. Learn from your mentor, I suppose that's what he is,' and he waved Enow's poem into Tipoung'he's face, 'and tamper your own impulses.'



## Chapter Thirteen

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### Eclipse Beyond the Grove

The students returned to campus bereaved and subdued in bereavement. Their Prof Emeritus Wirngam Ngaadungri had died suddenly abroad and although the students hardly knew him, his vision still haunted them along the stony corridors from which fear seeped as if from the cracked Council sewage. They went into the halls and came out with bowed heads, their hearts heavy with Dr Takim talking about the intellectual misery that would come without end; and Dr Sigala vowed the sun had fallen from the sky and that the veil of knowledge had been torn apart in the hearts of good men. The radio, especially the English desk, made a really big deal out of it; the Sabbath morning programme that had resurrected from its own ashes repeatedly for the curious reason that it burned the fingers of officialdom too often, devoted its entire ninety minutes to unearthing the unpatriotic circumstances of the professor's demise. It was a national disgrace. Ambushed patriotism. Tipoung'he again remembered that word, its vibrations and thumbprint on his heart, but Dr Sigala said they should ask why the professor never breathed his last in his fatherland; that it was simply evidence of misplaced priorities that such a hero should die in a different man's land. There was a debate, initiated by *The Bangemba Post*, on what was to be done, to honour the man of Letters, immortalise his name, and let generations to come never forget that once upon a time there was a man who spoke the truth because he loved his country. So in the end, a Society was founded to nurture a fresh creativity. Papers on diverse subjects were to be presented quarterly, while a writing contest, one genre at a time, was to be launched. But what a waste, Dr Sigala said at the start of each lecture, and indeed what a stupid waste, Dr Taanwahni concurred, and said in the light of what has happened, the humiliation that resurrected residual antagonisms, a good Francophone is a dead

one. The students loved the phrase and clung to it as the very expression of their near sainthood, and tortured the Frogs everyday with it until it became their motto of defiance.

But when Dr Takim walked in, hooded in black, the pain disappeared and he shuffled his books and talked literature and ideology: catharsis has many definitions and avenues, and the world will never end in tears. Tipoung'he was again in his orbit where the stories and their analyses made him feel the earth under his feet, assured of the four points of the compass. Dr Takim had fought single-handedly against a suspicious establishment that had its misgivings about the good faith of the lecturer talking Biafra to Anglos *dans la langue de Shakespeare*, as if it would have been okay otherwise. So as a concession to his promise to toe the line and not preach a secessionist gospel, the course had been scheduled for thirty minutes, instead of forty-five, during which the students gulped Takimistic mugs of Mezo and Okigbo wine, of jungle oaths and lusts behind a peeping sun where toads of war were crushed by social injustices; and to balance the nihilistic equation and prolong the inevitable, Takim introduced a complementary diatribe of how Mor-Zamba hoped to liberate his own people from a Toura-Gaullist coalition. The administration shivered in *c'est incroyable* tantrums, muted ejaculations of executive admonishment, alarmed by juxtapositions that crept into the lecture, and referred to Mor-Zamba as a prisoner with no crime. Inevitably this was followed by a rude *demande d'explication d'ici deux jours*, before the full weight of the administrative axe falls. But Takim sniggered at the awkward spasm of death from the Chancellery and hunched his Okonkwo shoulders and said woe betides he who dares to cut my *t* and dot my *i*, *akunyam!* His eyes burned like live coals and he read the authoritative note and instead saw a dagger targeting his tongue and what was life worth after that? His tongue and his dictionary, how could he live without these, he who urged his students to go for the big dreams and bigger utterances that traced new horizons in an adventure for meaning? But he thought it wise to exchange notes with Dr Ndille who had always fought off the administration's attempts to castrate him for reasons as treasonable as insubordination during meetings and inconvenient association with Graffi raffia wine. Not a loud speaker, Ndille however knew when to be metaphorical and when to be direct, and capable of provoking a creative earthquake that



would simmer hot ash into administrative eyes, and in his moment of need, Takim said to himself, that's my man! So that by the time Takim emerged from the Ndillean smithy he was already rehearsing his sentences, only elevated, to the arrogant authority.

On the back of the *demande*, as advised by Ndille because then the shredder in the boss' office would be absolutely useless, and in a frenzy of his recent inspiration, Dr Takim stabbed his way across the sheet in a nonchalant denunciation of *this* authoritarian stigmatisation of the genuine intellectual as a rebel and stereotyping of same as a beggarly urchin scampering for crumbs at the feet of the almighty boss; that the practice was obnoxious, a horrible vexation to the intellectual freedom that the University symbolises and which he, Takim would never, yes, never stoop to serve. He paused and reviewed his rage as it surged over the page, and smiled wickedly, imagining the dumb look on the face of the illiterate rascal at the Chancellery charged with sniffing every word that the professors uttered or scribbled, for evidence of Nyobean catchphrases. He would get the knock-out in translation when the note finally climbed the administrative steps into his observatory, and even with the verbatim distortions, Takim still knew the fellow would be nettled into offensive ugliness. So *à propos* of the anticipated showdown, Takim again grasped his pen and slashed venomous lines about institutional miscarriages year in year out, making us the laughing stock of the academic world, he declared. In conclusion, and addressing the subject for the first time, he denied any guilt of patriotic intransigence as stated by the guillotine, and demanded an end to the retarding practice of sending his papers to the Chancellery for a baccalaureate-holder who did not understand a word of English to censor before he can present it at the monthly Departmental Lecture Series. That was abominably colonialist and disastrously Napoleonic, he declared again, violating the bi-cultural context of national evolution with a universal prospectus that was increasingly Anglo-Saxon, and augured the death of *our* University. Thereafter, he felt fresh and seemed to have finally emerged from the prolonged mourning of his mentor.

Satisfied with his *repond sans delai*, Takim tickled his students' brains with a summary of the exchange, but warned them to be ready for the worst, even incarceration, for his recalcitrance.

'The New Deal,' he said, 'is just the same old wine in a new bottle, if you believe the Rambler, and I have no reason not to believe him, a bundle of empty phrases, so don't be fooled.'

He made two photocopies of his 'reply' and sent one to his Department Head with a humble scribble at the top, 'For your information, Sir, before *my* crucifixion.' The other copy he folded carefully and slid it into the original envelope with a daring scrawl in bold red, BACK TO SENDER. By noon he was summoned to the *Bureau de Suivelliance des Affaires Academique* and promptly requested to surrender the original reply.

A smile flickered around Takim's foul lips as his eyes winked maliciously.

'N'est pas, l'Administration est fait par écrit, Chef?'

But that was not the point, the Chef explained, subdued by the unexpected reference to his holy title; certain things can still be verbalised for bridges of understanding, see? No one was interested in curbing freedoms in the academe, the authorities simply wished for a more comprehensive harmonisation of varsity talk. And to which Takim only laughed loudly because as he explained, harmony was only the pseudonym for assimilating his Anglo brains into nought, that is what remained of it given that he could not even express himself to Chef in his own colonial tongue in which he was comfortable, ironic as it was. The Chef fell back in the folds of his puffing leather, knocked almost unconscious by the resonance of his own pride emanating from Takim's swollen lips, who wondered in English now, how, when you say *je ne comprends pas votre Anglais-là*, what do you mean *Chef*, as far as the harmonisation humbug goes? On the jarring note of cultural boomerang, Takim stormed out of the air conditioned office into the steaming heat and crossed the pot-holed yard in Okonkwo strides, and saw his Judas colleagues pretending not to notice his agitation.

Whenever he was in a fighting mode Takim usually gained a degree of spiritual inspiration and so his ideological lecture that afternoon was inspired by the sermon on the Mountain, but tired of the meekly preachiness of Christ, he turned to Dr King and told the students of what he was seeing from the mountain top.

'Which mountain, Sir?' a student called from the middle of the hall.

'Fako of course,' another said as if it was too obvious to be doubted.

‘Or whatever and wherever,’ Takim said, glad in his heart that the students were picking the thread where it led. He loved talking to them in symbolic terms and believed that they gained more intuitively that way, and the Fako became another displaced landmark in a discourse that was meant to destabilise the cultural affluence of falsehood. And the students searched everywhere for symbolic evidence that was then stretched into living fabrics of regional versus national truths. They were thrilled by the confluences of meaning that they could almost without effort establish from the fingertips of their imagination.

But the students wondered what was to become of their future, following what was happening, unrelated to the demise of the professor they barely knew, and yet inseparable from it at the same time through the troubles heaped on Takim’s head. Dr Takim was furious over his recent loss and present humiliation, and transformed his lectures into dirges for a mentor who had been humiliated by human vultures preying on a conscripted consciousness and now repeated in the humiliation of his person. He seemed to stand on the Fako as he talked, and the students were awed by the vibrating voice thundering over their heads, chipping away at the ideological construction that undermined individual and regional identity. Little did he know that he was being prophetic of his own pedagogic lore because in the same dirgy mood of his representation the course on ideology was also suppressed from the timetable. At the regular fortnightly Departmental meeting, the Head of Department explained the contingent decisions from above against which the Department was handicapped. But Dr Taanwahni wanted to know if they could not protest and see who would dare resist their combined force, for it all amounted to an abuse of intellectualism by chaps who could not spell their names.

‘What they’re doing is wrong,’ he said, ‘and if we allow them get away with it, we’re accomplices also.’

But other voices opposed the muscle-flexing and instead called for considerate response. That was Dr Bambi’s opinion backed by his FAKATA faction, which had never forgiven Taanwahni who like Dr Ndille sneered at their brotherly embrace and instead preferring Graffi handshakes.

Balkanised on personal and cultural grounds, the Department dangled precariously from the noose of national unity, and which on its part became a strategic vice in the little cracks of cultural difference. It was a timely theme which gradually sneaked into Bambe's lectures and spiced his rhetoric about literature of conscientization for which he hurriedly scribbled a hilarious pamphlet, *Signs and Miracles: Beyond the Hammocks of the Mungo*. The students fawned over it to circumvent the professor's ire at being slighted, but especially to entice a generous grade based on an example or two from the roots research hurriedly packaged. Buoyed by the students' critical acclaim (who could ignore that, he asked), Bambe was soon sweating practical innuendoes of the serious writer-pedagogue's antics to further acclaim from the students, translating Mark Anthony's dirge into a comic extravagance, smiling and winking while inviting his fellow countrymen to lend him their earlobes. That was testimony, he claimed, of how a sense of national tragedy could be rendered in soothing tablets of nerve-thawing nivaquine. No need to grow old before age knocks on your doors, he cautioned, and flashed a postcard from his Irish classmate at Leeds years before. The fellow had been radicalised in Irish resistant folklore, but eventually seeing the light made amends in daily confessions to a British national conscience and sued for embrace across the barbed boundary. The card advertised the wisdom of a hyper Bud Spencer bloke with a miniscule guitar striving to break the strings with his fleshy fingers. Below, in neat calligraphy, were the impressive words:

*'The size of your instrument doesn't matter; your skill does.'*

Dr Bambe cast the benevolent seer on the class and felt kin rhythms vibrate in his own heart chambers, and then belaboured the encryption as a patriotic verse par excellence that should inspire so-called marginalised consciences to seek a new meaning for their lives. How could it be otherwise, when the national image imposed itself on every banknote and coin, on every lintel, and hailed mighty Epasa Moto as the *raison d'être* of why the instrumental nation must lend itself to the skilful midwife that is the nation builder, the teacher? That was the surface meaning which he emphasised, and laughingly cautioned the students against cashing in too much on the deeper meaning.

‘When you stretch meaning too far,’ he said, ‘it becomes meaningless and therefore defeats the very purpose of intellectual formation.’

One month after this outburst of innovative pedagogy, Dr Bambe was appointed to head a culture department in the Ministry, and he moaned to the students thereafter how service to the fatherland was cutting him off from his most beloved environment. He was expected to sweat in Pierre Cardin outfit every day, and appear executive when his circus attire, before now, was the image of a man in his own constituency. Yes, there was power out there, and the power of authority, which he loved and would not give up for even the oxygen that he breathed, but he missed the fringe benefits in the academe, although this specific intelligence was whispered only to Dr Ngoumbey across their narrow office space. But dedicated to duty, he was cautious not to exaggerate the consequences of opportunity cost that made him whine every day, eating his cake and still having it, etcetera, etcetera, and fed his students who were quick to suspect his tilting political philosophy with a confused political porridge of his own. There was no denying that the politicians made outrageous promises that could never be fulfilled in a hundred years and it was only appropriate to question and even criticise the gap between appearance and reality. Even more imperative was the need to be constructive in the criticism, not to forsake *la Patrie* for the interest of shadowy alternatives, which would amount to throwing away the baby with the bath water.

The students listened, their doubts growing every week, and now eyeing their degree and imagining themselves in the province as graduates with a *Licence es Lettre, Hon.* But having listened to other voices in what was increasingly becoming a counter discourse, the students again listened for words that still conjured the light they already knew, and how could anyone think they could be blinded again? Like the rest, Tipoung’s heart fluttered, a new window had opened through which he saw vast spaces of unploughed meaning waiting to be reclaimed, and now Dr Bambe’s words were only drops of water on a duck’s back. He polished his feathery coat every morning, and with each stroke of the brush he felt a lasting confidence in the knowledge of his own heart which not even Dr Bambe’s antics could not derail. Had Dr Taanwahni not argued that

criticism was an individual affair based on the ingredients in the soup one was eating? Dr Bambe's *eru*-talk with oil cooked dark in bits of dry fish and *kanda* could never substitute the *achu*' sauce on which Tipoung'he was nourished, and vice versa, and he came to the simple equation that what you know is what you know. What you say and how, became complements to such contextual knowledge. His friends laughed and said it was rhetorical nonsense, and too obvious for any critical endeavour. But it was only because they failed to see it within the context of specialised discourses, he said, almost pleading, because it was foolish to hail a Jack of all trade who was also a master of all. However, a bit of *eru* in the yellow sauce may prove a delicious hybrid without adequately representing both. *Chez Alice* became the lab for theoretical experimentation, having been introduced to a Spooner discourse at the start of the new academic year by Dr Ndille, with only a few of them in class now and so much manageable. If the Bean was dizzy then it was only fair intellectual bargain, they concluded, to urge Alice in her wonderland concoctions to spice the *eru* with a bit of *asu' choup*. Expressing himself as such, Tipoung'he called it the theory of Spoonerised gourmandism.

'Are you not allowing a Maitrise bombastic illusion get into your head?'

It was his friend Ngoran who usually saw the same things as Tipoung'he but of recent began to doubt the steadfastness of sticking even to Marxist slogans with which he planned to dissect Dickens. At a recent homecoming event in his village to celebrate his tribesman's ace-mystery in Parliament, they had been cautioned against the kind of fervour that intoxicates reasonable minds in search of a way forward and the words stuck to Ngoran's lips like glue. Tipoung'he considered the charge and smiled wryly and then shrugged.

'Why not?' he said; no need to split hair with those who were only too ready to serve Volpone on his dying bed and call him God. But Dr Ndziy, just returned from the States with a bag of theories on Miller's salesman as a casualty of deterministic forces, thought the equation of taste and mental buds an interesting confluence of critical thought and urged the boys on. He loved his coffee and would feel crucified without it, and while listening to the students

and delivering his lectures paused on the doorsteps of the salesman's enquiries for a sip and added that it felt so wonderful, until Tipoung<sup>7</sup>he, listening and watching, also said how terrible to watch a man sip the beverage. A man of conscience, Dr Ndziy felt a heavy guilt and ordered for soft drinks from the Secretariat where the secretary had devised a strategy to survive on a few francs out of the temple (in order not to contravene divine ire) by stocking the mini fridge. The class got the cue and every week they shared the responsibility 'to supply' Coke and Fanta and Tonic while talking theory and annotating their bibliographies.

They began attending Dr Bambe's course on early English Modernism in the enclosed space of his office during which Dr Ngoumbey would either be in class or perch in his seat ready to chip in an unsolicited word on the abusive stylistics of political jargon tilting the national agenda rather dangerously to the left, and now invading the academia in a most unguarded and therefore ungodly manner. Such cues served Dr Bambe's purpose and on his chunky face a tantalising veil fell and he talked like a preacher caught between the extremes of liberation and theology. A mixture of the two as some colleagues were then proposing would only breed hypocrites and Dr Bambe wanted to know how mutually exclusive concepts could ferment in the same wineskin. As an alternative, and talking as both pedagogue and neophyte political scientist, he mesmerised the students with a dazzling demonstration of commonsense.

'Let's put it this way,' he said, passing a hand over his red lips involuntarily, 'rather than allow yourselves to be preyed upon and exploited by angry pedagogues and the ungrateful newspaper editors whose only purpose is to profit on sensationalism, go back home and fill pages and pages with your anger, and then put a flame to it. When it burns and turns to ashes, you'll feel a patriotic peace that nothing can describe.'

'Ashes to ashes, then?' Ngoran said.

'Exactly,' Dr Bambe said; 'or at least almost that, depending on how you define matter. But all this talk of ideological positioning is mere intellectual waste of time. You can't oppose an idea without a secret desire to impose yours on others, see?'

‘So how do we situate Dedalus in this context, prof?’ Tipoung’he said. ‘Is he not right to express discomfort that ideas infringe on his individual comfort?’

‘I was expecting that from you!’ Dr Bambe said, ‘but put within context, Stephen is the perfect recipe for social chaos; if everyone’s individual comfort is to be prized above the collective whole, then we may all end up in splinters. Even in ideological positioning there’s bound to be mutual respect and a willingness to surrender some degree of individual privilege and thereby concede the privileges of others. But your Stephen is a bunch of chaos, masterminding his own illusions into concrete insubordination that can only take root away from home, beyond the frontier. Is that what you wish for as law-abiding citizens with a ten-year commitment to serve the government wherever you’re posted within the national territory where every place is home?’

Marie yawned and stretched her arms across the faces of the two boys sitting on either side, a yawn of the crucifix, Tipoung’he thought. She was always bored after scribbling every word that Dr Bambe uttered, the questions from the students, and even explanatory sketches. Often, the yawn was a signal to Dr Bambe to digress into the-night-before fantasies and eventually bring the lecture to a halt.

Suddenly Tipoung’he was distracted and only followed the lecture and debate like the sound of distant raindrops, fading away. There was a drawing of a man’s head on the wall behind Dr Bambe; he had noticed it the week before and stared blankly at its curves and hooked nose, the brushed hair and the parting line on the left, and the rimless glasses. Listening to Dr Bambe distractedly, and then watching Marie as her thin blouse marked the curves of her body, the thin bra sleeves showing on her shoulders, he suddenly saw what he had not seen before in the drawing, and noticed what seemed like the full burst. He looked again and nearly shouted with joy at his discovery of the emerging presence from the picture, a duplicity emerging like a dawn, the stretched arm where the hair line was before, the breasts as the philosophic forehead and the bended knee that had been the nose, and finally the womb as centre of vision, God’s own eye and eternal source of knowledge. Did Adam notice all this in the mystery of knowledge before regretting



the transgression of too much knowledge? Was this not the arm of Delilah, generations later, across Samson's bushy head, staunch strands of the Lord's mysterious presence in the wilderness of everywhere, now vibrating in Marie's hypnotic yawn across the room? He looked again at Marie and then at the drawing without the previous shades of doubt, and for the first time seemed to make sense of what was written above the picture: ONTOLOGY OF A MAN'S MIND. And in his limited mind he saw the names appear in rapid succession on the doubled face – Eve, Helen, Delilah, the Queen of Sheeba, Qwang, Maud Gonne, Marilyn Monroe, Winnie, Diana, Nyieh, yes, even Nyieh! It was a soothing discovery that also humbled him, but also made him wonder about the rib theory.

From that moment Tipoung's interest in Dr Bамbe's lectures vanished and he began to sketch his own head and in order not to draw attention, sat at the extreme of the little group of students. Every other week he scribbled a few key words of the lecture intermittently, and then spent the rest of the hour doing his sketch. Back in his room, he tried to develop it like photographers do, a dark room with lurid lighting, bringing forth the image as conceived and begotten. He felt empowered, his poems making his head to grow big, but now a new inspiration, sketchy still, and yet with the powerful promise of peace after the storm. Finally he looked at the picture, personalised in ink and signed at the bottom right as he used to see on every piece by Rocky Arts, and smiled in his self-fulfilled moment. He desired nothing more of the world of crazy shouts outside and was hiding now even from the balmy voice also encoded, whose key rattled his own key in the lock and she came in, an accusing look in her soft eyes.

'You'll get blind,' she said, 'locking yourself up like this.'

But he did not mind; he was seeing beyond mere human vision, and like the song, knew the sounds of silence that human ears never hear. Nyieh made the bed, cleaned the few utensils in the corner where his Indesit cooker stood on the cane cupboard and they laughed a bit, listening to their own world of shared secrets now in his bunker and thereafter in her tryst. That was how he described the difference, the crude and the refined, and between the two he found peace, never complete but peaceful enough. But it was only the peace of the world and his heart continued to grow tense

whenever he listened beyond the world, heartaches that narrated epics from Trojan shores through the ghetto *mini cites* wobbling on the slopes where Becca Valley was the flashpoint between the students and the authorities over their money. *Parlement* was born overnight and as suddenly, posed a threat to the country's Legislature. Running battles across gutters of rot, tear-gassed screams and overwhelming panic accompanied by itchy sprays from huge police tanks, and 'Tipoung'he sneaked into their 'Presidency' hideout to await the next uncertain day. Often the students were advised by the leaders of *Parlement* to evacuate their rooms for the night before the ninjas arrive under cover of night, and Nyieh left, frustrated that 'Tipoung'he insisted on staying because someone had to be witness so as to tell the story.

## Chapter Fourteen

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### Tiny Beads of Inspiration

**T**he turbulence on campus only scratched the outer skin of 'Tipoung'he's body, and as he walked about and chatted and disputed, he also knew a truth that was beyond the scrimmage. Sympathetic to the cause, he was also aware of unuttered screams tearing down the walls of human sanity; but also loyal to the God within him, and almost cried to make this evident, a single verse that would bear the scars of Calvary. He was a lonely Michael Angelo, poorly clad and with the burden of the Chapel on his shoulders, refusing to submit to authoritative arrogance. He was searching for the confluence of meaning, where bellicose voices found peace, but his verses gave a contrary evidence, of rash discourses of identity and meaning but very soon everything was falling apart around him. He clung to his own faith, the centre pole in the unruly vicissitudes of daily ups and downs, man-pass-man confrontations that exposed the fault lines of the nation.

Where was the meaning that they had to cuddle and articulate against the impending doom? 'Tipoung'he looked and found only irate shadows darting across marked constituencies, and thinking of the nation as a mosaic arrangement, scribbled a verse about identities. Only one soul could understand his pain and attach safety valves to it and so apart from discussing draft chapters of his dissertation with Dr Taanwahni, he would also slip a draft poem 'accidentally' between the pages.

'I found this in your work,' the mentor would say, a wondering look in his eyes.

'O, I'm sorry Prof,' 'Tipoung'he said but laughing all the time; 'it was never meant to be there.'

'Well, never mind, it is there now.' And then looking at 'Tipoung'he in the eye, came the question he had dreaded, yet anticipated, all along, 'Do you believe in this?'

He did not know and mumbled a few words about inspiration and the moment of writing.

'We all say that, don't we?' It was an accusation levied against the escapist artist unable to justify his art as self-conscious, self-implicating. Tipoung'he knew this but knew also that consciousness and others' awareness of it threatened him like a plague. He cherished his anonymity. Then Dr Taanwahni pulled out the bottom drawer of his table and brought out a blue folder, the colour of peace, Tipoung'he thought.

'You see this,' he said, and shoved a sheaf of papers under Tipoung'he's nose, 'beautifully typed?'

Tipoung'he nodded, suddenly made speechless by a force he did not know, magnetised.

'Well, I'm going to destroy them.' He turned the pages gently and paused to read briefly. 'But I'll not burn them, no, not that; rather, I'll have to re-write them. That too is destruction, or reconstruction, which implies a challenge of the original vision. So destruction is not always negative. In fact it has to be creative if it must be meaningful, and you must always listen to whatever you do, and destroy when necessary, in order to enable the creative impulse finally. And so in whatever you do, never fall in love with what you write. That goes for your analysis of Hardy too.'

Tipoung'he listened and his heart throbbed like never before, and suddenly he found the clue to his misery, beyond it. The chapters of his dissertation, all painstakingly done, were to be re-done, to highlight the key points why revenge fails as a liberating scheme for Tess, and why the notion of love was more than love. A latch had been released from the door of a dark room of consciousness into which Tipoung'he had been locked and through a crack of the opening flap he discerned a fledgling totem to his suffering and became aware of it as he had never felt otherwise. He went back to work, resisting the love that blinds, and understood why man was banished from Eden. Amidst the sound of helicopters smoking the students' hideouts so that the gendarmes could penetrate the stronghold, Tipoung'he crossed out paragraphs and rephrased himself, in a mad rush to meet deadlines. Defences were scrambled to justify the propaganda of normalcy on campus, and the students blackmailed into office spaces for the exercise. Suddenly Tipoung'he found himself at the mercy of Dr Ngamchuo and Dr Chinda who

bundled him into one of the spare offices for a cordial chit-chat over his work until he said 'fated.' Dr Chinda puffed at his cigarette and wanted to know why he used such an inflated verb.

'Not everybody can write like Herminway and get away with it,' said Dr Ngamchuo and yes, Dr Chinda agreed, and faulted him for arrogant inflection of the syntax.

'Why do you try to be more Hardysque than Hardy?' he said; 'the one thing you must do and not lecture us about your intentions, is just to listen and learn.'

In the end they awarded his grade and he blinked as he stepped out. Disappointed friends and relations who had glued their ears to the door asked about the outcome and he smiled generously, showing them his copy of the report. The following weeks, a truce having been reached between the authorities and the students, the campus buzzed timidly with life for the new academic year. Suspicious gazes told volumes about the mistrust that was rooted in the hearts of the students and Tipoung'he shuddered, listening to Dr Bambe who was moaning about the bad grains in the place and contaminated the sprouts of hope. He wondered what was so difficult about setting one's anger on paper and then on fire? The private newspapers were still having a field day following the events on campus, and Dr Bambe described them as agents of disunity, especially as the national weekly was beginning to crawl on the pavement of neglect, and some despicable tongues labelled it as Pravda. Listening to him and his patriotic exhortation, Tipoung'he began to draft a poem in his mind which he intended to send to the *Bangemba Post*. He had heard of vaccines and how their effectiveness depended on mixing a bit of the disease specimen with other substances to come up with a cure. He was searching for the cure of his heart, and Dr Bambe was providing the inspiration. He had the basic substance and knew that the title would come easy, whereas, at times, it was the reverse when he had the title and laboured to bring out the verses, one after another.

'If you asked me,' he said, 'I'll submit that writers and their critics together with half-baked newspaper columnists who fill their pages with sneezed rubbish, ought to be grateful for the neo-colonial politician whose so-called misrule becomes meat for the ever devouring seer.'

'You're right Prof,' Mojebase said. His project was on the need to trough political mismanagement from independence leadership back to the European landlord, circumventing Ngugi. 'They're not just half-baked, they're half-cooked, which is even more dangerous.'

By the end of the lecture, however, 'Tipoung'he was certain that the inspiration was developing instead into a newspaper article and that evening he discussed the possible captions with Nyieh. She had insisted on them leaving the 'Presidency' to the very heart of the capital, Moussadiy, where she thought a degree of anonymity would protect his bitterness. She was against blatant titles that made him a sitting duck to the blind, and finally they reached a compromise with 'Phenomenal Fallacy of the Anglophone Sub-Identity.' He did not know what it meant, in fact, but he loved it. He read the phrase again and concluded that it was Takimistically abstract enough to derail any snivelling *espion* scavenging after scribbled testimonies, hoping to justify his pieces of silver from the ever apprehensive master. After three days of writing and rewriting, telling himself always, never fall in love with what you write, never, 'Tipoung'he pleaded with the Department secretary to help him type it. Although 'Tipoung'he had never accepted the invitation to attend one of their numerous retreats, brother Emmanuel had never stopped loving him as brotherman and only hoped that one day he shall see the light. When he stopped by at noon, 'Tipoung'he was shocked to find six pages of his own mind carefully typed and clipped together. He read them several times over and paused to ask himself if he were the author of this sentence or that paragraph, flashy moments of brilliance which even his abnegating consciousness could not fail to be proud of, like a new birth. He was sure of one thing; he would not rest until the pages were with the Editor of *The Bangemba Post*.

The following day during the Structuralism, which he did not cherish and skived whenever possible, his steps descended into the valley, skipping over the bumps of hardened mud and up again on the other side and to the *Avenue Anomah* where the medical school was a pearl in a dilapidating contrivance of tilting mud structures. Under the light of day *Avenue Anomah* offered a casual look that threatened no one, the opposite of its neonated whorls at night capturing the wayward adventurers of urban progress.

Tipoung'he walked into the office as Mojebase had described, and immediately knew he was in the wrong spot. There were no shelves lined with newspapers and Remington machines behind which sat short-skirted ladies who frowned over their burden, rattling out the columns. Instead he saw an empty room with two men, one middle aged and the other slightly older, sitting across a huge table, its formica top peeling off in an awkward curl. The room was filled with the smell of cigarette and in the corner an old JVC radio cassette was playing in a whining drawl and one of the men sang along.

'Hey,' one of the men said, 'See who come along in our moment of loneliness!'

But the other was not listening, lost in song and half-screened by smoke, almost croaking, and Tipoung'he was afraid he was going to choke on his own enthusiasm.

'Kebila my boy, see!'

And he nudged Kebila who then blinked briefly.

'Na weti again now, Faiy?' he barked out, blinking and Tipoung'he saw the blurred eyes briefly before they closed again.

'Send me Lord, I'm listening,' the one called Faiy quoted. 'Here's the Lord's angel for you, what d'you say now?'

At last Kebila opened his eyes long enough to recognise the niggardly angel in a jeering scrutiny that made Tipoung'he feel like a cockroach about to be squashed by the blistering stare. Then Kebila lost interest in him and turned instead to Faiy.

'I tell you Faiy,' he said, 'old Lee gets into a man's blood like sin.'

And he laughed suddenly in self-amusement and then sang out loud, after the JVC.

'You talk too much rubbish, you know that?' Faiy said.

Kebila looked up surprised.

'Not rubbish, man,' he said, pretending to be hurt; 'cause I know all about it, man, 'cause I been through it a many times, wi' ma baby and she ain't got no substitute, you hear Faiy?'

Then he caught the sound from the box in the corner and went into a pathetic submission, his voice timbral and hypnotic, about being the guy that travel both land and sea and about to kill someone. Tipoung'he listened and the sound of the guitar that seemed to rise from the blood reminded him of their own invention in the village, hooking a single string of wire from an empty milk tin and attaching this to the cut and bowed cypress branch, and using a bamboo slit

and the left thumb, with the tin wedged against the left shoulder, the tensed and relaxed instrument produced a sound of varying pitches, like the one from the cassette, crawling.

But Kebila looked up again, something like pain in his blurry but penetrating eyes and took his revenge on the glowing cigarette between his fingers.

‘Got that son?’ he said to Tipoung’he who nodded nervously, not knowing what he was supposed to have gotten.

Then he went on in a more familiar tone, explaining: ‘It’s the blues boy, right here,’ (and he punched at his left breast savagely) ‘raging in the Ole Lord’s kingdom in yours truly, see, and spreads through my blood and into my bones like sin, boy ... yeah, ole Hooker gonna make me kill meself with a bit of joy, every time he groans into ma poor heart.’ His three-month stay in London for a course on the challenges of Third World reporting had caused his tongue to tango with a bit of Cockney, which he easily dragged into Louisiana fantasies.

And he laughed, suddenly merry, and his voice again chimed with the set in the corner, ‘I tell you truly, Faiy, if Hooker aint God’s own son, who else is in our black universe?’

Finally inspired, Faiy too began tapping his fingers on the table to the rhythm of the broken voice from the set.

‘Love will make you gamble,’ he said, a melancholic twang in his voice.

‘Das ma boy,’ Kebila said, brightening, ‘it’ll make you drink too, you know, and when you look up, prayerful, the good Lord’ll say, yea, rascal son of mine, you made the right choice, only if your choice was St James.’

‘And sing sin that’ll take you straight to the right hand of God the Father,’ Faiy droned, and then nodding frantically, added, ‘and make you stay out all night long, love will, looking for love.’

‘But there’s no substitute,’ Kebila said in a rhythmic cue to the set, ‘none for love.’

The song ended and Kebila seemed to be awake for the first time in days. He looked up at the uncomfortable youth in front of him, and scrutinised him with his blurred penetrating eyes.

‘What do you want?’

To Tipoung’he he sounded like a police officer, showing off but pretending to be civil. Somewhere in the back of his mind the voice sounded faintly familiar.



'I brought an article, Sir,' Tipoung'he said and tried not to sound intimidated. But it seemed his courage was suddenly drained by the two elderly clowns and he felt the urge to walk out of the stuffy room at that moment, but it was already too late because Kebila's eyes popped out a little.

'I told you Faiy, didn't I,' he said, 'to ask that son of a devil to put up a notice that this was not *his* office anymore! See what one goes through now, every damn hour of the day? How many times must a man be crucified before his bloody carcass is left to rot in peace? A man can't even listen to a good song any more without someone rushing in with an announcement, with an article, and Beelzebub alone knows what else!'

'Nfor's no son of the devil, Faiy, jus' cool down man.'

'Speak for yerself, I know what I know, period!'

Then his hand shot out like the devil's spear, so suddenly Tipoung'he took an involuntary step back. Then he understood and handed over the sealed envelope to Kebila who snatched it and turned it over.

'What did you say it was, boy?'

'An article, Sir.'

'About a death or *nda-moon*?'

And he laughed at his own sense of humour.

But he read out the address in his heavy voice that again sounded remotely familiar to Tipoung'he, 'To the Editor-in-Chief, *The Bangemba Post...*'

Then he turned to Faiy, fire in his eyes, 'Rubbish Faiy, you hear me! You instruct that devilish imp to redirect his mail to *his* Editor-in-chiefhood, not here, *ngang*! There ain't room for him here no more! He moved out, didn't he? He preferred the gutter to tested friendship and lied about bossy ultimatums, so let him stay there and rot in the supremacy of his chiefhood! For this is my sanctuary now, my resting place! You should tell'im, if anyone knows a thing about bloody bosses and their smoke screens, it's yours truly.'

This last remark was addressed to Tipoung'he who was beginning to wonder what he was doing there. Then Kebila giggled and sang a bit out of tune, his own concoction, 'Oh, Lee Hooker gonna make me kill meself in this damn and rotten world 'cause I'm a peeping prying humbug!'

The years suddenly reeled back and Tipoung'he was once more in Aghem, searching for the inspiration to Ache-Head, but *that* voice was Christlike, not a rusty clash of cymbals that Kebila's throat emitted.

As Kebila tore the envelope open lustfully and brought out the folded sheets, Tipoung'he's heart contracted. Then another piercing stare from Kebila that made Tipoung'he's knees seem to rattle as he stood there, suddenly exposed and defenceless.

'Tell me,' Kebila said to Tipoung'he and Faiy looked on amused, 'Wha's your name?'

Tipoung'he told him almost angrily because he had signed his name at the bottom of the last page. But Kebila wanted the Christian name too. Tipoung'he told him he had none.

'I discarded it,' he added, hoping for some reprieve from the Inquisition.

'Serious?'

Tipoung'he was serious and said yes.

'Faiy, do you hear that?' Kebila cried beating Faiy on the shoulder from across the table. 'The boy discards of his Christian name in this very, very Christian nation!'

'But why did you do it, son?' Faiy said.

Tipoung'he could hear the voice of God in Eden reprimanding Adam, why did you do it! The all-knowing God suddenly without knowledge, but Tipoung'he was not expected to contradict the gospel. He had been forced into confessing his decision so many times it was boring to begin narrating what many described as perfidious. Would the two not sneer at him too for claiming to be bored with *his* name and then argue simply that Joshua was a beautiful and symbolic name? But Tipoung'he had long overcome the anger of confronting derisive tongues and told them, as they probed him, of his grandfather's conversion to Christianity and how at his death his family had simply heaped the dead man's identity onto his head as the first new born in the family.

'Were they hoping to have the old man back, that way?' Faiy said and laughed. For the first time since he entered the room, Tipoung'he felt a sense of relief and thought they may not be as bad as they seemed, after all.

'For all that,' Kebila probed him again, 'is your old man, granted he has not yet gone upstairs too, is he the boss of *The Bangemba Post*?'

Tipoung'he looked puzzled, but without waiting for answer Kebila went on: 'This is a novel son, and not an article, and to have it published as your old man commands us to do, even if he is now upstairs, we'll have to dedicate ten editions of *The Bangemba* to it alone.' He grabbed Tipoung'he's arm suddenly and whispered harshly in his face, 'Na who go pay, eh?'

Tipoung'he's heart was beating so fast all of a sudden, he could not answer. Was it excitement that the article may be accepted, after all, or just the brutality of words stumbling out of Kebila's mouth like the habitual pastime of a Blues imagination?

But Kebila was flipping through the pages, picking them off one at a time, and reading in bits and Tipoung'he could almost hear him cursing under his breath as he paused to drag at his cigarette and puffed generously. He had rushed to the end of it, and then came back to the start and read the title and then glared at Tipoung'he distantly through the cloud of smoke. Then went on reading, looked up again as if he wanted to say something to Faiy, seated in an expectant mood on the other side of the table, but changed his mind. Then he felt inside his trouser pockets for a while.

'Here,' he said to Tipoung'he, 'canter up the street and get me a pack of cigarettes, will you?'

'Which?' Tipoung'he said with disappointment. He was expecting at least a remark about the article.

'Which what?' Kebila said, incredulous, 'Jay-Bee of course!'

The boy slouched out as if he were going for his own execution. His enthusiasm had been afflicted by the diversion, and he felt a tinge of anger against the boastful personality with only guffaws and smoke to offer.

Once in the street however, he realised that he did not ask if Kebila smoked the mentholated stuff in a green pack or the other type in blue. Not a smoker himself, Tipoung'he knew that there was a soft and strong breed of the brand. They had lit and sucked the various stubs around Man di Loss' store in the village and knew the difference, one breeding fresh air into the lungs, and the other blunting the tongue rashly. He paused for a while and contemplated

returning to Kebila's sanctuary for further advice, but dreaded the smoke-burned eyes. He had to think fast, and concluded that such bloodshot eyes could never be forged by the menthol. He stood in front of the vendor, contemplated for a prayerful moment and then pointed at the blue pack.

When he returned Kebila was still bowed over the papers. He looked up and peered at Tipoung'he half quizzically, and then grabbed at the pack of cigarettes, his eyes still on Tipoung'he. Then he tore the pack with his teeth and tapped out one.

'Don't write such stuff again son,' he said in a rather pathetic voice that sounded husky when sober. 'And don't think such thoughts, either; they are not good for your health, nor for your future, if you ask me, in this New Deal dispensation. D'you understand?'

Tipoung'he shifted uneasily, not knowing how to answer. If he gave in that would be a denial of himself, and it seemed he had been denying himself all his life; if he resisted, he risked the potency of Kebila's crude tongue, which may then block any chance of the article ever being published. He instead cleared his throat as if searching for what to say, trying to overcome his embarrassment.

Kebila cooked his head and smiled. He seemed to have read the thoughts of Tipoung'he. Then he applied a flame to his cigarette from a grey lighter, and tossed both pack and lighter absent-mindedly to Faiy who served himself and made sure he slipped a few extras into his chest pocket before returning the pack and lighter.

'You don't have to steal in broad daylight, Faiy,' Kebila said and added, 'Matthew seven-seven.'

'Damn you, pagan,' Faiy said, 'I didn't steal, I took.'

'Yes, but without asking, see? I define the act the way I see it.'

'Okay, okay,' Faiy said pleadingly, 'let's call it tit-for-tat then.'

'Do me I do you, eh?'

'Of course!'

Kebila had laid down the sheaves of paper on the table and for a brief second a wild thought flashed through Tipoung'he's mind to snatch them and dash out of the cramped room before the two older men knew what he was doing. But that moment also passed and he cursed his inability, submitting to his wounded pride. Had he not written what he wrote and even loved it? Had he not thought

it out, all of it, before he wrote? And he had read it over too, repeatedly making the changes that had to be made, and knew finally that *that* was what he wanted to say. Perhaps not all of it.

‘Wha’s Anglophone, son?’ Kebila asked suddenly, forgetting Faiy’s thievery and cutting into ‘Tipoung’he’s thoughts and puffing smoke into his face with a soft *poh* sound from his blackened lips.

‘I ... I’m Anglophone,’ ‘Tipoung’he said in a strangled voice, suddenly uncertain. This fellow had an uncanny approach to the core of human misery, a way to make one feel so brokenly uncomfortable and dull against his own supremacy, he reflected. But he had never thought about such questions, and simply knew what he knew without the conscious effort to define things. Why think about what was obvious? He recalled his primary school days, the early morning mental exercises that required of one robotic responses just before the Common Entrance, but he had never been good at sums; it gave him headaches and made him weak where he thought he was strong. And now Kebila was talking in tongues like the components of a complex of BODMAS.

‘You hear that Faiy!’ Kebila burst out, again dragging ‘Tipoung’he out of his own thoughts. ‘I ask the fellow *what* Anglophone is and he claims he *is* Anglophone, *habba!*’

And he laughed in a hooting manner, heavy with beery vibrations, infecting Faiy.

‘Big grammar, Faiy!’ he laughed and blew his nose into a handkerchief that had obviously lived the value of its money. ‘This will make you dizzy, old boy, if you were only to glance at it, God be with you!’ Then he read from the paper, “‘The cultural fallacy of an Anglophone periphery and submission to inferiority manacles defeats the good faith of incumbent *isms*’.” He looked up briefly, as if shocked, and cried, ‘Jesus of Nazareth! Really big, big Oyibo grammar, Faiy, will choke you to death.’ His eyes returned to the paper and ran across the page: “‘Anglophone stewardship in this arrangement, then, is an institutionalised blunder’.”

He was silent for a while and then continued.

‘So tell me son, have you ever read Soyinka?’

The boy was again taken aback; he was not prepared for the unexpected stab at his own ability. He staggered in his consciousness.

‘Yes, some bit,’ he said as if admitting a guilt. But it was the acquittal which he needed at that moment from the unfamiliar territory of Kebila’s abstract imagination.

Kebila pushed the papers aside and crushed the stub in the wooden tray in the middle of the table.

‘Now, tell me,’ he said, lighting another cigarette, ‘Some drunk said Soyinka ought to go beyond mere interpretation of the obvious. What do you think, boy?’

He was again becoming dizzy with the summons to say things too readily, things that did not evolve from within. He was baffled, thrown off guard and his heart beat fast. He hated to appear ignorant. But he did not know what to say, and knew that acceptance of his article probably depended on his ability to give a correct answer.

Kebila eyed him from the corner of his eye, laughing. Then he blew thick smoke into Tipoung’he’s eyes and he coughed, choking.

‘You will suffocate that child, Uncle Keby!’ Faiy said affectionately without being surprised. He was enjoying the show, reclined in his loop-sided swivel chair, and expected it to continue eternally.

‘You’re damn right I’ll, and it were time too,’ Kebila thundered, ‘like ole Hooker executes me alive, with bars of sin, listen!’

And he laughed.

‘But he must learn to withstand smoke, Faiy,’ Kebila said drearily like a prophet, ‘if he must go on like this, recklessly. D’you hear me, boy? Else this big, big grammar will take you nowhere, in the end, believe you me; I been there too. It will only help some ignorant thug hoping for appointment out there to churn your bowels into paste, son, on charges of treason and declare you persona non-grata around your own homestead,’ he added in a strangely pathetic voice, trembling a bit.

Then he stood up suddenly and pulled the boy’s face closer to his. The smell of beer and cigarettes mingled into a strong nauseating odour and Tipoung’he cringed. He would have stepped back, but Kebila’s grip was so tight Tipoung’he thought he was detained by a vice and winced in pain.

‘Look into my eyes, boy’ he said puffing more smoke into the watery eyes, ‘see how wha’ was white is now a coat of brown? They’ve been burned red or brown by the smoke of authoritative

double-speak and I no longer feel the painful tinge. D'you understand me? Son, big grammar in this unholy establishment will take you nowhere if you can't make friends with smoke! Tha's your only bail in these dispensations of national unity, whoever crafted it and whatever tha' means, shit! There's some fellow out there just waiting to churn your bowels out on a cold steel table. And he doesn't even need Michael West to understand and then misinterpret your big grammar. 'Tha's wha' the political God created him for, a leech on the brains of the nation, oh, unlike Lee Hooker here killing me alive!"

The music from the JVC had subsided into a sleepy guitar twang, crawling into Tipoung'he's blood like the sensation from a blade of grass on the nape. Tipoung'he felt light perspiration on his face, but had steeled himself to look on, straight into Kebila's burning eyes, and endure the repugnant smell from the other.

'Leave the boy alone, Kebila,' Faiy said, almost a command, 'don't ruin him with your big mouth.'

Kebila gave him an admonishing look and shook his head with another look of indifference in his blurred eyes.

'Ma big mouth will take me far away, Faiy, from the claws of demons,' he said with conviction; 'my only bail against the devils out there stalking my heels. Have you forgotten the blacksmiths of the establishment who've given up on me because they can't keep pace even with my broken tendons?'

It seemed to be the continuation of a previous debate for Faiy quickly replied:

'Yes, it will take you far, that I know, if I know nothing else; it will take you six feet deep where you can't fall again, and I won't be of help anymore.'

He sounded like a pathetic old rag, falling back into his chair with a creak and seemed to lose all his previous enthusiasm, all of a sudden.

'Come,' Kebila said to Tipoung'he, gathering the papers off the table with his left hand, 'I'm now the empty tin of snuff with only the smell to tell the story of those heydays.'

The glowing cigarette between his lips was like a landmark, and he pulled on it vigorously.

'Let's leave this old creep before he starts wailing here on the wrong side of the Mungo.'

He dragged Tipoung'he out of the room as if from the plagues, but paused at the door and looked back.

'You like wailing, not so, Faiy?' He sounded very grave, solemn; 'it were time you stopped and move on, and seek new voices, new stars, and a renewed horizon. I hear the voice in the wilderness, but who'll follow me? ... Come!'

He gave such a tug Tipoung'he, stumbling after him, was afraid his hand might have been pulled out of its socket.

They took a few tricky turns through narrow passages marked by rotten fences of split bamboo. Black-green water meandered through the shallow boundary gutters and spilled onto the narrow tracks like watery tar. Then they entered the yard of the office, a battered building apparently standing on one leg and recently renovated, a few marigolds giving a sparkle to the environment. Tipoung'he saw the small sign like a wind vane directive, pointing out with a stiff wooden finger. His heart gave a sudden lurch against his ribs as he read the familiar words, *The Bangemba Post* and in smaller print, *Voice of the Voiceless*; and his head swirled with imaginings. He felt like embracing Kebila, O, the Blues-drunk fellow!

'All you filthy mouth Romans,' Kebila shouted as he stooped through the latched gateway in what was apparently a familiar greeting, 'here comes Mark Anthony and young Octavius! Draw your bloody swords of flattery and show your ugly faces of woe, if you're men with balls!'

He was laughing and puffed smoke into the face of a young man sitting behind a table, sorting through a heap of papers.

'Get that mad dog out of this place or put the chain on him!'

It was a sharp tittering voice from the inner office partitioned with plywood.

'It's only good old Uncle Kebila, boss,' the boy behind the table said.

'As if he doesn't know, the old creep,' Kebila laughed, 'show your ugly face.'

'Godforsaken mother poker!' the voice behind the wall echoed and Tipoung'he heard chairs being pulled about. Kebila had perched himself on a stool and planted his charge in front of him like a piece of evidence and crushed his cigarette in a crystal tray on the nearby table.



The door into the inner office on which was written ‘*Editor-in-Chief*’ opened slightly with a loud creak and a puffy head showed in the crack. He had dark shrewd eyes, blown out jaws and round red lips like those of a child who had refused to be weaned.

‘Morning, your Worship!’ the red lips said, coming out, ‘what can I do for you, Oga Himself?’

‘Unzip my fly and then scoop out my divine python,’ Kebila said, ‘so I can perform the ritual of ablution, you breeder of bad souls.’

‘Poor Uncle Kebila,’ the lips went on, ignoring the order, ‘The Right Honourable without a constituency! How’s your chest today?’ and he punched Kebila softly on the chest and listened as if for a sound.

‘Tha’s my doctor’s bowl of misery, not mine and definitely not yours,’ Kebila said and shook out another cigarette.

The puffy jowls seemed to tremble as the head moved pathetically from side to side, shaking.

‘One of these days we’ll have to drag you out of the gutter, Old Boy, that’s where so much smoke leads you!’

‘Weti do, almighty Nfor?’ Kebila said and lit his cigarette; ‘it’s the same road we’ll all tread one day or another, one way or another, the last, inevitable jump. But here, attend to this young man if you all connive to call me an exhausted entity.’

The Boss seemed to notice ‘Tipoung’he for the first time and took him in with a sidelong glance without really moving his head. It was like being submitted to an x-ray, ‘Tipoung’he thought, and concluded that the Boss was a proud man who saw every other fellow beneath his bossy feet. His exterminating look seemed to ask, who the hell is he?

‘He’s a small-no-bi-sick Sasse Oyibo Grammar boy,’ Kebila said in a pleading voice, answering the question not posed, ‘here to see you in person Sir, and I, your humble servant – you understand na? – had to go through all sorts of salubrious indignities – just look at my polished *boukarie* – to bring him to your kingdom. And you know what? He dares to say that Soyinka should stop interpreting his society, simply! Tha’s his contention, and he wants you to give it voice, whether you like it or not. Wha’ d’you say, Boss? Is tha’ not heresy, pure and simple? Thank God not from me this time! Think

the chap's okay upstairs? Well, it's for you to decide, now that he's here and swears no one can send him away come rain or thunder, not so, son?'

He gave Tipoung'he slight punches as he talked. Then he pulled the article from the envelope and handed it to the Boss, adding: 'His credentials, if you don't mind, Sir!'

The Boss glanced at the caption and his little eyes popped out, blinking rapidly, as he read it out silently, and in a sharp whisper to Kebila, but loud enough for all to hear, 'Holy Mary! Is this your latest device to have my fingers burned again?'

'Ohooo!' Kebila laughed, 'I no bi talk! You better ask him. For my part, frankly, I don't understand him, and don't know if I really care about your fingers!'

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Tipoung'he returned to campus on the wind of a promise from Nfor the Boss 'to look at it,' but whatever that meant did not matter; he had offered his voice to the world, or at least was in the process of doing so, and how was it going to be received? They were his intimate thoughts of himself and of his community, put together in private as a code, transmitting distant fears and future hopes on a Machiavellian altar. His own doubts were an impediment and he knew he had to overcome that before anyone could listen to him.

That afternoon, during Dr Sigala's lecture to the enlarged common core class on the Africanisation of Apartheid, Tipoung'he only half listened to the usual thrill, his mind preoccupied with the morning's events. He had left the offices of *The Bangemba Post* not sure of what to expect. The Boss had said the attempt was courageous, almost too courageous and added that it was a bit flat too and needed to be spiced. Tipoung'he did not understand, but Kebila asked him not to worry about the jargon of professional propaganda, and then talked endlessly about the journey of a million miles and a step, the Great Wall of China and a brick, and the lone voice for the misery of his people. To be or not to be silenced, Kebila concluded, that was the question, and the Boss, he said with assurance, was saying more or less the same thing. The thing may never see the light of day, Tipoung'he concluded, but walked back to campus with a new exultation in his heart; he was already seeing

things differently, a veil had been lifted over his eyes and he blinked as he met people up the hill and stepped aside to give them way. And as he listened to Dr Sigala who was always talking as if someone were chasing him, arguing that Apartheid was in fact a needful drug to contemporary African leadership without which they too would be exposed, the alibi for a legalised dictatorship breeding fear all over the continent, 'Tipoung'he began scribbling down disjointed lines of another boggling thought.

'Apartheid is right here,' Dr Sigala was saying, 'on your own doorsteps, so why look far, down South?'

It was a recurrent theme with which his anger was assuaged into acceptable tablets of pedagogy. He was waving his copy of *Reuben* wildly as if uncertain about a target and crushed the pages as quickly as he straightened out others for evidence of what he was saying. And the class was as usual subdued, taking down notes after offering debatable opinions once in a while.

'The most appalling post-slavery crime against the peoples of African roots,' he went on, 'is the denial of Apartheid in African countries by African leadership. Denial, I mean, which is misrepresentation. And misrepresentation that is convenience with a Machiavellian yardstick. Your leaders see Botha's dread as an alibi for internal wrong to their own people, and every end-of-year speech becomes a crafted opportunity to abandon Mandela on the Afrikaans crucifix beyond the most extreme machination of Mr Botha. Their speech-writers will go bankrupt if the gates of Robben Island were to be flung open, and so what they dread most is the eventual freedom of the anti-Apartheid icon, when the New Year speeches would become predictably bland.'

But Tipoung'he suddenly felt bored with the effort of taking down notes and listening to his own thoughts and jotting down what he was only half aware of. He felt the urge to be sick.

*When I opened my eyes...*

It was the beginning like being purged, but he crossed it out. It was not like what he felt, the sickening sensation, no; but he felt a bit hollow still, trying to realise what it was, taking the path he was taking. The Boss had said his writing was not spicy and Tipoung'he knew that poetry which he wanted to write was the spice of utterance, but his mind went blank again with thought and his hand, holding the pen, was lame. He closed his eyes and tried to think,

but it was like waking against a stonewall, with the subdued murmurings in the class and the lecturer's voice continuously tapping against his skull.

'Insolence to autocratic gimmicks,' Dr Sigala was saying, 'is the first step to freedom, individual and collective. If we're to consider the demise of Reuben, then, as counterpart to a liberator in a jungle of cowards, his insubordination must be seen as the cross for the crucifixion of his cowardice first, without which the freedom of his people will be another post-independence pipedream. Freedom is, and must always remain, a complementary equation.'

There was whistling from the back of the room. The backbenchers always anticipated some well-phrased remark from the lecturers, and that became the opening statement or conclusion to their essays.

'As it is commonly known,' they would begin their inspired essays, but the lecturer will write in the margin in red, 'by who, and source,' or 'not by me,' so that the students' enthusiasm often withered against the incriminating knowledge of little critical evidence, the expired material dumped in the bunker of the library like the gorgon's chamber.

Such statements also meant that the class was ended, whether the students liked it or not as they clamoured for more, and in the lull before the next lecturer came in, Tipoung he glanced at the back page where he had scribbled his lines, disjointed and meaningless. But he did not bother to define himself then nor his intentions as far as they were intentional, because it seemed to him somehow that he was also struggling with what he did not know, skeletal images of the imagined personality. The foetus of thought; the morpheme of discourse: endless vistas from a tiniest grain of sand in his mind. As he pieced the words together and the lines stood out and he read them over and over again, trying to get used to them, recognise them and make them recognise him, he felt the class at a distance, drifting away as if on a breeze of forgetfulness and in a drone of familiar comfort in which he could finally find himself where he wanted. The words were jostling for position, cancelled and inserted, circled and arrowed to new positions; and when he read them again, the face emerging from the page, his hand suddenly strayed to the top of the sheet where he wrote in parentheses, *defiance* and after a hyphen, *for dr s*.

That was to be the title, he was sure of it, like faith not to be questioned, and it seemed to him that that too was what the professor had been urging him to write down all through the two hours of lecture. It was like suddenly getting out of a jungle, knowing himself, and where he was going. He had been following fixed, shadowy routes in his mind for too long now, the meandering and then straightened-out ways, certified by those whose words he had heard all his life, and it pained him to think of himself as a sheep following blindly on the footpath of doom. He stared at the sheet of paper before him and held his pen with aggressive assurance, but not really knowing where and how to begin patching the thing into place.

Then he paused and read them over and argued with himself if that was how it was supposed to be, but the more he tried to think, the more his mind became vacant. He opened his eyes and stared blankly at the head in front, that of Lady Spokes whose romantic demons recently pitted don against student and the consequences of the vexatious comportment had near catastrophic effects on the degree results and eventually split the research class into camps, the one siding with self-appointed class Spokesman and his provincial French and clinical tongue on which every word was a snare; and the other, mostly the females and a few tribally conscious male bigots who insisted that the golden principle of who is who in every community holds true even in situations of emotional chaos, and so hailed Lady Spokes as the last granddaughter of the Queen of Sheba: that head in front of Tipoung'he for which many have groaned and collapsed, now draped in oiled curls, the oil glistening on her neck in the afternoon sun with a suffocating odour, repellent. But it was like staring at a blank wall, seeing nothing but the furls of his own mind weaving out patterns before his eyes that he wanted to feel and did not wish to see. But he looked on still, without attempting to feel, nor see, and gradually the knot in his heart loosened and he felt words coming to his lips to be swallowed or spat out, and he knew he must hurry to put them down on paper as they came, the kiss of acknowledgement, otherwise they'll disappear like vapour with the next thought pressing on.

*Those w say i shdn't c  
will nvr c god after ...*

That was like it, yes, the feeling he was having, and contending with in a shorthand that was invented to catch up with Dr Sigala's rush. And his soul was poured out on the paper, and he was excited in his release, against those who fed dust into his eyes and stuffed cotton into his ears and sprinkled vinegar onto his dry tongue, when he had a mission to fulfil, even if as Kebila had cautioned, he must first brave the smoke. But how could they who served him dust and erected screens ever hope to see God after the Armageddon? And he heard an echo of Dr Taanwahni's own voice softly chanting, *on the last day, O God, all such Communists and dust-makers shall go to hell*. And he saw Nicodemus Rarh heading the throng, a stooping mass servant.

Yes, that was it, violent thoughts of the Armageddon, provoking distant recollections, which coiled around his own selfish thoughts all day and became an obsession as he moved up and down in his daily routine, talking abstractly, and a sneaking tingle in his veins, crawling. Eventually he felt a pain around his head and thought of Milton and Hades, and of Armageddon for the individual and for the nation, and 'shou'rin case,' as the old man in Nyenmechop would say, 'shou'rin case nothing changed, weti people them go do?' The people were forever maggots of a political design to which he too was expected to deign, voicelessly ululating as the caravan of racketeering nation-builders cruised by. Nothing mattered beyond that as far as life goes, Tipoung'he concluded, slipping into bed and tired at last, the pain which he had resisted all day spreading all over his body like fire in the wilderness of his heart, his nerves stretched to breaking point; it was like the end of the road, the only road that ends, suddenly, may be to continue somewhere, in a different space, a different life altogether, but still rooted to the Ndamnyeh fig in his heart. But it could only be so because the pulse in his veins must be continuity itself, even beyond nothingness, the endless flow of the mass of continuity, heavily sluggish visiting him now, bedridden and trembling from the almost sensuous pangs of fever creeping over him and tore his nerves apart. Nyieh had left, kissing him goodnight and cuddling his head like his mother, because her sister was visiting, and he understood. Left on his own, despondent, he tried to understand the pain eating into his bones like little maggots with sharp teeth gnawing at his joints. And he

began to meditate on his own death in a more profound manner, imagining the compressed loneliness of the white-sheeted bed for his remains. His imagination became such a stiff reality that he kicked out suddenly, to be free of the stiffening, confined space. He was not yet a specie for Number One, shelved like ice cubes, cold and a collateral memory to those burdened to remember. But he still meditated, as his brain burned, trying to imagine the watery eyes looking down at his stretched-out body, some with scorn, a thing to be forgotten. He trembled lightly and thought it was the shudder of death and wrapped himself more securely into the thin sheets, as the fansidar battled the germ in his joints. What if she were to return the following day and knock without a response, the tomb empty, would she say he was a good friend indeed, pure at heart? A weak smile flitted on his dry lips in the sombre room with shady light because he had twisted the bedside lamp toward the floor, as he saw Nyieh's tears in Hardy's line. It will just be one man gone out of her life and nothing more? He had no answer to that and immediately pushed the thought out of his mind, thinking that God was always there, great and affirmed in every creed, even to the godless. He wanted to flip through the pages of the mini blue Gideon's bible which Nyieh had placed under his pillow, and warned him not to throw it away, for he was already getting wayward and she feared for his soul when the one hundred and forty-four shall grace the horizon. As his pulse increased with imagined possibilities of an enlarging world crowding his head and he listened and listened to the early morning sounds of birds and drunks weaving patterns in his delirious mind, he thought the door opened and God stood there calling.

*Speak, Lord, I'm listening.*

But God's voice rang out in soft coos instead, the sound was caught between a range of hills amongst which he could identify the Ndamnyeh, the clatter of horse hooves, God's jazz to his blistered soul. And he was suddenly falling out of the open sky and flung out his hands for a mysterious branch to hold, and turning wildly in midair in order to avoid the head-dive into gaping hell, he plunged into the laps of Nyieh, seated by the bedside, and smiling divinely down on him.

'You already here,' he said, suppressing a yawn and thinking, *my guardian angel*, 'what's the time?'

She twisted her arm around his head and glanced at her watch.

'Getting to seven-fifteen,' she said.

'How long you been sitting here?'

She smiled.

'Long enough to see you sweat gallons of sin,' she said.

'Did I talk in my sleep?'

After reading Freud and wondering over the inner treacheries of the human soul, he was always horrified by any form of self-confessing babble in his sleep. He turned and realised that his whole body was soaked in sweat.

'I used a towel on your face,' she explained, watching him. 'How do you feel now?' she said and stood up and began fretting in the cane cupboard where he knew only two eggs remained in the blue plastic tray with its separating cones and she had brought a packet of sugar for him three days before. She did not answer, busy with her breakfast chores, and he stretched and listened to the crackling joints like a mass of twigs breaking. She had been playing his favourite songs, the poetry of common folks, as one of the young female artists recently described his beloved brand. He listened and Nyieh's rattling of the bowl was the sound of drums that merged with the music.

*When I die, I may not go to heaven.*

He sang quietly and as always, substituted Ndamnyeh for Texas, his paradise on earth. But his head was becoming light again and he was feeling tired and so only hummed the remaining section.



## Chapter Fifteen

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### Acolytes and Misinterpreters

They were seated in a circle, their bottles half empty. At a glance, they were just the ordinary bunch that animates Yaoundé's chicken parlours, where the fiscal temperature of the country is often taken against other sentimental variables of place of birth and state of mind, but then at closer view, reading their credentials and raucous identification, the whole dynamics of an evening out changes because they became sharpshooters of inconvenience splitting his Excellency's hair with defenders of the faith: an incongruous quartet of Kebila the ex-journalist, Nfor the Boss who had forced his mic down the throat of his boss, Dr Ndille the grumbling volcano, and Nchinda the contractor, spare parts dealer, and brand name for the *Fins Frais* chain of poisonnerie. Dr Ndille was really a cool fella, although too closed within himself as to appear almost cynical in his distorting utterances, and his bag of stories tickled the group into nostalgic guffaws of those days when they saw no harm in swearing allegiance to the flag.

'If thy eye lulls you into sinfulness,' Ndille was saying, 'and you don't wish to be a sinner, then plug it out. Is that not the rule?'

'But I don't wish to be a Cyclops,' said Nfor, confessing.

'Yet you claim your frog eye is bad enough for any diagnosis?'

'As bad as it goes, yes, but there are better options, I suppose?'

'Yes?'

'Oh, simply walk away, okay? My vision was never registered as collateral at Fouban, and in fact any piece of paper can be re-written at best or torn in bits otherwise, that's my submission.'

The others knew his position already, and that it was beyond censure, only that when it came to matters of bread and butter, all things considered, they realised that the system had installed roadblocks against a consensual walk away, Kebila pointed out.

'Then we'll hire a bulldozer,' Nfor said.

‘But which is better,’ Nchinda said, ‘to help a man regain his sight, lead him across a Slough of Despond in the meantime, or simply allow him to sink in his own misery?’

‘Ah, Massa Good Samaritan,’ Kebila barked, ‘if he spends his time constructing castles of misery for humanity, and telling them that red is as good with a star as green with two, if not better, then his cup of tea is well earned. Besides, your bridge over the Slough may well lead him to the City of Destruction.’

‘Agreed, technically,’ Nchinda said, ‘but remember the stitch in time, granted that no one knows tomorrow and we must act with a certain degree of contingency, and the wisdom of what you’d like others do to you, so how do we reconcile these?’

‘O, Yesus,’ Ndille exclaimed, ‘the Shylock of Mokolo turned a fisher of men? Something is amiss here: was it ever a question of reconciliation? You just heard Nfor on Foumban!’

‘Why not, if reconciliation can be a new alternative?’ Nchinda retorted with painful arrogance. ‘Just because a man is considerate should provoke no name-calling and I’m no student of history. But we just can’t continue breaking away and bolting off at the least inconvenience. Say what you please, the mixture is already a deal, me as evidence, and part of the system to which we must submit with only varying degrees of qualifiers.’

‘I’ve already been sold once,’ Kebila said, ‘no one auctions my progeny again under my guard! My conscience is not a deal to be negotiated through tips and kick-backs because the pro-forma licence to kill is ten times above market value.’

Nchinda was piqued by the blunt reference to his diurnal *n’bahala* up and down ministerial staircases, through dark and crowded corridors saying *oui monsieur, pas de probleme*, when he should have cried foul and kicked the door in the face of snivelling conspiracies against his wallet. But that was the system and he swallowed his phlegm then as now, before reminding the others that it takes time to change what is traditionally a win-win engagement.

‘Whose tradition are you talking about?’ Ndille said; ‘because I also know of a tradition that changes with the day, and it simply stinks!’

Kebila blinked as if privy to sacred knowledge and on the verge of saying something, instead dived for his bottle.

‘That makes two of us,’ Nfor said, ‘and in my dictionary, tradition, if you were to ask my opinion, is doing the same spot so often you eventually forget how it was ever done at first.’

‘And what is wrong with that?’ Nchinda asked. He was a staunch believer in a pattern that replicates itself, as long as no fingers are burned. A traditionalist after the last franc, he was however not a fundamentalist and obliged a tipping sentimentality as a renovating impetus to the rusty wheels of tradition. And there, he made a necessary distinction. Tolerance and understanding, he argued, were the only means to ensure against the erosion of tradition.

‘And yet,’ Kebila said at last, ‘tradition without the convenience of erosion becomes a disgusting thing with only old tales of carbon-dated fossils to celebrate, but no future. Take away your tradition if it only transforms me into a *mbamba* fossil.’

‘Still I ask, and what’s wrong with that, eh?’

‘Every abominable nuisance that has to do with monotony and monotonous hegemony,’ Nfor spat out, ‘that’s what! The terrible drudgery of the boss in lower case forever right on the illusion of his own retarded mind and resisting new insights simply because they clash with his ghostly reality, that’s your tradition to which I’ll not bow.’

His little red lips sucked at his bottle of Guinness and his eyes rolled as he swallowed.

‘I’m really surprised man,’ Nchinda said, aware like the rest of the group, of Nfor’s professional miscarriages with his former boss; ‘everyday you recorded your stories and one would imagine you loved doing it.’

‘In the past, and in *that* tense: that’s the difference, capital numbskull! Even then, remember, I was hoping to put some sense into steel brains and when I failed, I simply beat dust off my feet and said *ngang* to mental slavery.’ Nfor was sweating the drink already, and mopped his healthy jowls with a hand-marked kerchief. ‘Sure I love my job, if that’s what you mean, Old Boy, but that’s also what a coffin peddler will tell you, no? The question is, what if our road safety campaigns and health for all slogans against the magic year became so successful that the death rate drops to a record low, what will your funerary bloke do?’

And his former boss was really a coffin-seller if anything, and bossed the propaganda corporation like a funereal establishment, in which everything was prepared ahead of time and only awaited the occurrence when a team of trusted wisemen with bright eyes and slippery lips would select the appropriate stuff for the event. But Nfor and a few other big mouths had intoned their swan song and the boss, desperate to make amends, had summoned him into his plush office and wondered off the point why he chose to appear on the screen always in *agbada*?

'Memory, especially of recent events, can be a terrible ghost that comes back to haunt us, you know,' he quipped, 'and why should any patriotic and peace loving citizen wish for the return of chaos?' But Nfor did not answer, still waiting for the divide-and-rule linchpin that would push thirty pieces of silver into his *agbada* pouches. 'And do you know of *Couture Extra-Terrestre* downtown from where I always get my suits?' Nfor felt the Judas peck on his soft jaw as a counter to his jeremiad that was not just his. A four-letter missile stood on his tongue-tip ready to be launched at the target opposite him, after which the boss would have been atomic reality, but God suddenly spoke to him, *bold on recalcitrant son of mine*, and he breathed slowly, conceding. The boss was later to boast at a tribal confab how *hereusement pour nous, as ce moment-la, j'ai prier Maria, bebele Zamba!* The following day, Nfor collected three suits from *Extra-Terrestre* only for them to become zoo costume within a month, during which time the cords of understanding between boss and subordinate had been severed beyond repairs.

'Did you hear that?' Nchinda thundered as if he were the only one around the table with ears, 'the man's so dry upstairs he now compares his job with that of corpse planters!'

'Whether or not,' said Kebila, 'my children will not become living corpses under my watch. A momentum is in the air, you only have to listen.'

And he was at the centre of the momentum, which urged youths without face, as he described his dispossessed progeny, to look beyond the present yapping and be ready for the days of crimson showers from the horizon. Dr Ndille listened to him restate his faith in the future and nodded.

'You're right,' he said, 'to the future and to our children, that should be our toast to the past.' He had turned down an invitation years before to be the scribe of the Bangemba People's Conference,

nursing doubts about undercurrent rivalries. Today, however, he would say, 'only promise me a shipload of arms, and I'll serve you to my last breath.'

The Kassav tune that had been booming from the speaker behind them stopped and *Da Longo* clap-started the local rhythm to which the group responded as if on cue, clapping and clicking fingers, and Ndille even croaked the lyrics in untidy Duala.

'That fellow,' Nfor said, glad to change the topic, 'breeds pure heaven with his guitar. I can listen to him till death do us pay.'

'That'll be too monotonous, na?' Nchinda said, glad to jab the other where it must hurt.

'Hell, no,' Nfor cried and gulped from his bottle quickly; 'what I mean gentlemen ... excuse me, a man needs to belch ... excuse me ... if he lives well, you know... er...but what I mean is this, yes: everywhere you find the same blokes sitting on the same spot, presiding over the destiny of humanity. Like the preacher every Sunday of the year who repeats himself into insanity and calls it the word of God, but without the freshness it deserves.'

'Now, stop there!' Nchinda screamed and the others laughed, recognising an old pattern; he could be tolerant when his friend filled the columns of his paper with unnecessary exaggeration and outright falsehood, but not when that has to transgress his religious convictions. 'You forget the prelate as a dedicated man of God is forever inspired?'

'Damn you and your inspiration,' Kebila fired back, wiping away sweat that had trickled along his brow and into the corner of his eyes. 'Am I not inspired to be boozing meself to hell here?'

Nchinda considered this and decided to keep his peace. Did not even the dull and the ignorant feel that their say was righteous as the song says?

It was instead Ndille who spoke.

'I'm inclined to agree with the Keby on the issue of inspiration,' he said playfully.

'As if we don't know why,' Nchinda jeered; 'for the sake of your poetry corner, pacifying the piper's Boss and the Boss' man is an imperative. As for you (this time to Kebila who had opened his mouth about to blast Nchinda to early hell), your column is simply treasonable, and what would you do then without almighty Nfor?'

The others laughed because they knew how much Kebila hated insinuations of servitude on which his anti-establishment convictions were inspired. In his former professional life as Senior Political Analyst, English Desk, he had caused damaging confusion amongst his colleagues who, otherwise, endorsed all forms of official humiliation simply because the boss is never wrong even in a state of drunken sleep.

'I no blame you at all,' Kebila said with irony; 'but when you wallop into your bedroom tonight and then the jiggy-galloping as was decreed in the beginning or whenever, how else would that be explained, eh, except as a result of divine inspiration?'

'Yes, you answer that,' Nfor said, exonerated at last; 'that'll be it, no?'

'As if I can't,' Nchinda said, the veins showing in his stretched neck. 'Yet, don't you think it's advisable to say your say in a way that will make it possible for you to continue saying it for as long as possible, without stepping on toes and burning fingers?'

'Like hell no!' Ndille said.

'And I say too,' Kebila chained up, 'that like hell, no! What'll be the bloody use of the Fourth Estate if we continue to circumvent the matter at hand with a curious excuse that tolerates hooded mercenaries with daggers who put on sheep cloth of patriotism?'

'Must we continue listening to this bloated abstraction?' Nchinda said and the spark showed in his eyes. Without waiting for answer he screamed for the lady at the counter, 'Madam, can you pass judgement, now?'

The lady came almost immediately with the bill and technically placed the little straw plate with a cloth lining in the centre of the table, in front of nobody, and with a knowing smile, wriggled her voluptuous frame out of the shed. Nfor winked at Kebila who immediately started singing customised Lee Hooker sins about 'ma tantalising Mama, see her goin' wi' another man, and how she walks, dear God, and I wanna die.'

Nchinda slapped a green leaf in the plate and stood up.

'Sorry, gentlemen,' he said formally, 'long day tomorrow and I must leave,' and turning Kebila he added with a malicious grin, 'I hope you'll not miss me, Ole Boy? In any case, you take care of the remnants in the plate after Lady Booby serves herself.'

And he dashed out before Kebila could answer back, but he would not be silent if he had only the loudspeakers for his audience.

'You petty trader and thief and blind and leprous slave,' Kebila shouted after the departing figure, 'your defence is your crucifix'; and turned to his laughing colleagues, 'what does he think he is? Or is it because he has settled the communion bill for the first time since the death of Christ?'

That added more fuel to the laughter.

'The problem with you Kebila,' Nfor said, 'is that you don't believe any more – not even in yourself, and you're too serious even when a man simply touches your nose!'

And he burst out laughing again.

'Tha's not the point, man, else why should I still be hanging around such a bunch of believers? The problem is, the man expects me to change my name or accept a change that has been done on my behalf, and I say no: is that not reasonable fair play enough?'

Before Nfor could answer, a figure stooped into the shaded enclosure, followed by another, and surveyed the different sheds for any familiar face.

'Hey,' Nfor shouted and waved at the same time, 'over here, Prof!'

'Hell!' Kebila whispered to Ndille, 'wha's he doing here?'

But Dr Bambe had already shuffled his bulk between the dimly lit sheds and drinkers and began beaming at the faces even from the distance. As he shook hands and patted them on the back, Kebila pulled at his cigarette and released the thick smoke carelessly.

'Any more *kata-kata* acts on stage, Prof?'

'Massa, you dey na how na?' Dr Bambe said, a fixed smile on his face; 'you no fit change?'

'Why?' Kebila said as if change as a word in the English language died with Dr Johnson.

'Because we're supposed to be cooling off, not bantering,' Dr Bambe said.

'One or the other, either or, it makes no difference to me,' Kebila said. 'I need an egg-and-chick code to understand this whole arrangement of national unity and you're a flowering mystery.'

Dr Bambe was sensible enough to ignore him, shaking hands round the table. The man who screams at the least rustle is predictable, a known quantity, and can easily be dealt with.

The other man followed him like a shadow, a bit out of place the way he stood there and looked around.

‘Guys, my bro in-law,’ Dr Bambe said, ‘just come in from Kayville.’

Nfor was pulling an empty chair from the neighbouring shed and said *pardon chérie* to the lady whose skirt was disturbed by his task, and then squeezed it between Kebila and Dr Bambe to his left for the newcomer. That way he was sure of a buffer zone between the two belligerent fellows who never agreed on any bit of ideological presupposition.

‘So na JJC, no?’ Nfor said, shaking hands.

‘Another piece of mystery added to the puzzle?’ Kebila said and beamed a plastic smile to the newcomer, rejecting him.

The introductions were over and Kebila ordered for more drinks.

‘*N’est-ce pas c’est moi qui perdre,*’ he said.

‘Who asked you to be Father Christmas prematurely,’ Ndille said, ‘if you must moan in being a cheerful giver, eh Mola?’

He was talking to the in-law who looked shaken at the unexpected title, but only smiled in response, sniffing his environment instinctively. But Dr Bambe came to his rescue and explained how the big bro to the mother of his children was the one chief under whose five-starry shoulders the population of Kayville shuddered into a motion of law and order, officially scripted and delivered, based on the best book ever written, according to Bambe, and then quoted pages of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the passion of a ten year old reciting a memory verse. The people were awed, the don explained, as the vigilante drilled and enacted a benevolent peacekeeping that must have been the envy of the UN abortions in Western Sahara or Eritrea. Dr Bambe spoke and *Commy* as he fondly baptised his illustrious in-law smiled timidly, absorbing the showers of praise, while the others listened as to a prompted oracle. It had been *Commy* Mbimbe’s mission, then only a CID, to rid the city of the last vestiges of Nyobean rebels who had crossed over into the ‘West Bank’ during the First Republic, and to ensure today that no disguised conmen invade the place as Igbo Shylocks or – since there must always be a worst case scenario – some Biafra lunatic hatching a national nightmare. Thanks to the conflict between Dr Bambe and his colleagues, Mbimbe whose monthly trips to HQ became informal tutorial séances at home over a dish of *kwa-coco* and *mbanga*



*soup*, had a clear map of ideological positions and consequences as far as the perverse form of nationalism that was sprouting all over the continent goes. Was he to fold his arms and watch dissent take root from the national fringe, the microcosm threatening the macrocosm, when otherwise peace should have reigned? That was the question which Dr Bambe now posed without posing, riddling his tongue across the table and making faces with the half-drunk bunch to emphasise the thin line between the doublespeak superlatives in astute political mastership and the gloss of diplomacy that conscripts Amnesty International and Interpol confetti into Iscariotal child play.

But Kebila had listened and was fed up with the disputation.

'All this albatross-talk, eh, Dr Mola, why?,' he said, leaning forward in one of his sleazy fits of verbal diarrhoea; 'Wha's there in this establishment tha's worth my piss? All tha' preaching only bursts my brain tubes and gives me headache, can't you see?'

He squeezed his face into a distorted mask and his nostrils flared like time-beaten bellows, squinting. But Commissaire Mbimbe cleared his throat like a man who knew his place and also how to deal with verbal volcanoes, and for the first time seemed to have a human voice.

'I think,' he said, 'Prof stretched the facts a little too much. Of course you know *they* always talk in metaphors, these University men.'

'Aha, I see,' Kebila said, 'the common talk of the message and the messenger, and vice versa, eh?' And he giggled like a child and went on, 'Advocate for the defender, Pontius Pilate without his pail, flatfeet messiahs mistaken for Tonton Macoute sentries at the dark end of the street?'

'Before you came in,' Nfor said to Dr Bambe, hoping to change the topic, 'we were arguing about the cultural principles of inspiration.'

'Tha's not called for,' Kebila said, frustrated at being thwarted off his attack line.

'Of course we were,' Ndille concurred, still tentative where he stood with his ambiguous colleague.

'I don't follow,' Bambe said, a blank look in his eyes, left and right, to vacant smiles.

‘Simply put,’ Kebila said, giving in without surrendering the wheel, ‘we were peeping into the national anatomy as per presence and naming and belonging, and came to the conclusion that we’re a hypnotised bunch of cultural prostitutes who’ve migrated mentally beyond naming and beyond interpretation, who simply don’t know where they are and why, which is a national, if regional, tragedy. And so Prof, wha’s your take on that, now tha’ you follow?’

But before Dr Bambe could make his opinion known, Nfor said: ‘To the best of my knowledge there was no damn conclusion, no?’

‘Tha’s of li’l consequence as far as any such thing goes Oga,’ Kebila said, ‘and in any case, a conclusion would have been reached whether or not. Truth is tha’ in this country, courtesy of ignorant politicians and overreaching University fellows – excuse my French, gentlemen – we prize every baby doll or granny look as the very core of avant-garde wonders from a French potboiler resurrecting Picasso.’

‘Even though Picasso was not French?’

‘Wha’ does it matter?’ Kebila said with a ruffian’s frown. ‘The French indulge in an ugly prostitution of colonialism and slaughter cultures eventually.’

‘As you can see,’ Nfor said to Dr Bambe, ‘my own man is in one of his heightened states of rare inspiration, God save us now, if we can’t duck in time from the verbal blast!’

Kebila was pleased with the intervention and said ‘Damn you, Ole Boy,’ and then drank and smoked in one breathe, suddenly seduced into a frenzy state of consciousness by the architects of his personal misery, for which he had tons of proof any time of the day. He was evidence, he would say, the very incarnation of the anti-establishment cobwebs phrased into words which crept through the veins and into the heart like holy smoke.

‘The human constituency is a constantly shifting mass of earth,’ he said, ‘almost amoebic in a shapeless estimation of social good or evil, see?’

No one seemed to see except Kebila, and Dr Bambe smiled laconically. But he also caught the drift of Kebila’s argument and wondered if Nietzsche had soaked his brains in gallons of alcohol before configuring the state of human emotions beyond colloquial phraseology of a good and evil confluence.

‘But the human constituency that you speak of is an abstraction that I hardly endorse,’ he challenged, ready to take on the man who never surrendered to anyone, so that his own conceits seem to be his ruin at last. ‘You and I, all of us, I mean, make that abstraction less of a burden.’

Kebila’s mouth hung open miserably: ‘Wha’s an abstraction Sir?’

He could suddenly feign devastating ignorance that mocked his interlocutor, and in the brief moment between that state and the other’s blinking, managed to regain the reins of speech.

‘Wha’re its constituent parts?’ he continued. ‘Does it not depend on your position and intention, whether from his Excellency’s observatory of higher truths, your own Ivory Tower, or my own gutter dredge? C’mon, Prof, let’s not start to talk with water in our mouths, that na insincere behaviour, est-ce que I lie?’

He had turned to Nfor and then to the police boss in quick succession as he concluded, for sympathy.

Dr Bambe laughed with an effort. He was becoming uncomfortable, knowing that sooner or later Kebila would start stabbing his poor heart, calling him names, a flirt with *chakara* behaviour and then load a Fela Kuti Anikpula canon against his intellectual skull dabbling with a *zam-zam* ideology. He reflected fast and looked up, repentant, knowing that it was useless to engage in a verbal tug of war with even a cashiered journalist, since they always wield the last word directly or indirectly.

‘Ok, Kebiy,’ he said coyly, ‘I concede to your position that definitions are definitions only when understood in context, and can only be interpreted as such.’

‘I say, eh, Prof,’ Kebila said and drew his chair an inch closer so that it only clanged against that of the officer, ‘why are you always like this? Leave psychological warfare to Americans and the Soviets, but me and you, right now and right here na man to man. Why you di make me feel victorious when you know full well say na just tactic, eh? Old Boy, that na bad game, Nfor tell’am so, I beg.’

‘Prof,’ Nfor said wearily, ‘dear Uncle Kebila says no punches below the belt.’ Then he turned to Kebila, ‘Was that it, master?’

‘Well done ma poi,’ Kebila glowed with dignity; ‘at this rate you’ll soon be Editor-in-Chief of the national weekly. But where was I, eh?’ He scratched his head and looked around but no one offered the clue.

‘Anyway,’ he went on, ‘as I was saying Prof, yes, tha’s it, as I was saying, this type of talk di breed a gang of vandals in your palm grove already, unable to interpret anything ’cause everything’s such a dismal muddle, did you know?’

‘*Agent provocateur*, you, hackneyed Judas with no rope around your throat!’ Nfor screamed and his look would have annihilated any other *agent* if it were not Kebila. People at the other tables paused and looked briefly, but seemed to realise that it was none of their business if a bunch of *Anglofons* decided to commit collective suicide.

‘Why not?’ Kebila said, staring back blankly; ‘he has to know, if only to be sure of what he tells his bosses, and brats in the palm grove, eh Prof?’

‘Still it’s not for you to say,’ Nfor insisted; ‘let the bloke concerned blow the fire with his own mouth.’

‘Think so?’ Kebila said with a snarl; ‘we’ve gone beyond the bridge of interpretations and anger is our only interpretation now, for the national sore. The dream deferred and the bang at the end of the verse, remember, and what does that augur, if not the consequence of pretence while we sit on fuming Fako drinking and kissing and saying *on se porte bien*?’

‘I agree with you whole-heartedly, lad,’ Ndille said, ‘and will stand by you till the end of time.’

‘Before or after the cockcrow, doc?’ Kebila said, sobered by his own outburst.

But Dr Bambe was lost and admitted to that deficiency with a shake of the head, and even Mbimbe looked on expectantly, forever thirsty for spicy intelligence against the constituted authority of his own woes. Already, though, Bambe’s mind was rushing back to the recent disturbances on campus, the seductive talk of political saints sprouting on the TV screen every night to demolish blocks of resistance in a single Kubla Khan breath. He himself had offered an opinion, culturally coated in intellectual innuendoes, but with emphasis on the national whole and not sectarian interests, and the following day someone had scratched the emblematic line on his office door, *Soya-eater, Docta Eppesse*. For weeks he had carried that mark of Cain on his forehead and although he suspected grassland detractors for his ungainly characterisation, still he avoided any contact with the students and his non-aligned colleagues until the

premiere of what he had quickly drafted for the students of his jumping jack option to rehearse with huge tips from his sudden benevolence for taxi fare and snacks. He baptised it *Crossroads of Patriotic Joy* and hoped that hard feelings would be doused on the imaginative stage of national reconciliation. So he had sneaked back into campus and intoxicated everyone who crossed his path with balms of smile, a rare favour since his officious ascendancy. He looked at Kebila and shook his head.

‘No, I don’t follow.’

‘Let’s put it this way,’ Kebila said in a deliberately slow tone, ‘the man who attempts order in a chaotic environment is simply being disorderly, full stop.’

‘That sounds familiar,’ Dr Bambe said, smiling.

‘Of course I’m quoting you verbatim,’ Kebila said and beamed on the Prof benevolently. ‘I admired your courage during that TV debate and for the first time understood how a *stronghead* rascal feels in a place of conformists.

‘And how does that relate to vandalism on which I offered an opinion?’ There was an incredulous look on Dr Bambe’s glistening face, and a desperate urgency to know.

‘In every conceivable way, Prof, see?’

And because Dr Bambe’s kneaded brows said he was still in a mist of vision, Kebila went on to explain how a young man, Nfor could confirm, he said, stumbled into his underground hideout along *Avenue Anomah*, with a petition about gangsters who have hijacked the Anglophone dream in this country, and even footnoted the Ogun oracle with invisible ink as first defence witness. What did the Prof have to say about that, Kebila wanted to know, because of course, there is often the temptation of denying pain once you’re in the cosy sanctuary of a *joie de vivre* hemisphere.

Dr Bambe again considered his options. He had willingly crossed over to the camp of those who appended prefixes and suffixes to the binary nomenclature of the nation and had no regrets. But he had never known how to tackle Kebila’s erratic sophistication, and so decided to go for the middle position.

‘It may be the age-old question,’ he began evasively, ‘of how to say what you’ve got to say, and so on. I’ll never be a bedfellow to armchair critics who boost an empty ego on the altar of national unity, and you know that.’

Sure, Kebila knew that and much more, and wanted to say so in his own way, beginning with an ejaculated 'ha!,' but Nfor cut him short.

'There're critics and there're critics, Prof,' he said; 'Right-wing conformism from the University is ruining the state apparatus and the future. The question is, what must be done as an imperative and alternative?'

Ndille smiled at the beauty of the phrase, and might even borrow it as an alternative to his 'singing stones' and 'flying planes' exercises. Kebila shuddered with a potential outburst of concurring facts hanging from his black lips; he had compiled volumes not only against the three-for-five-francs intellectuals hooting big titles and flashing the fruits of backstreet printers, but also against the ignorant lawmakers, some of who even lost elections in their constituencies, he had argued, but by some incumbent miracle, were parachuted on the wings of Mephistopheles into the Glass Palace to pass laws that contradicted themselves without debate.

'Yes, of course,' Dr Bambe said in a conceding tone, 'I agree with you rhetorically; as far as analytical equivocation goes, so anything goes; margins are hardly ever visible in human interactions and even less so in imaginative representations. But your no-nonsense Leftist is an exterminator who doesn't want the show to go on even when blokes like me insist it must. So in his blind zest to appeal to the gallery he commits suicide and dooms whatever hope he ever garnered.'

For the first time since he joined the wild company, Dr Bambe appeared pleased with himself; he had hit the nail on the exact spot, and could see by the way Kebila wriggled, that his Achilles heel was exposed, he was a lame dog.

'Still, Prof,' Nfor persisted, 'what about the suggestion from honourable Kebila to Ogunise our own context, place the oracular lens over our canvass and see what impressions need a retouch?'

'That's not for me to conjecture,' Bambe said with determination. 'As you very well know, I'm an advocate of conscientisation, and perhaps what needs adjusting is the extent to which we're ready to grind the national conscience into pulp.'

'I don't think there is anything the matter with the national conscience,' Ndille declared; 'the problem is, and forever shall be, the individual conscience. Work on that, redeem it and the rest will fall in place.'

‘That may just be a call for chaos, in violation of a certain controlling order,’ Bambe countered.

‘Are you therefore suggesting that the young man was wrong, if we have to believe my own man here,’ Nfor went on, ‘that the moment of interpretation, any form of interpretation, whether political, social, or economic, even religious, is over?’

‘I’m a teacher sah, not an interpreter and may not be of much help in the science of hermeneutics irrespective of discipline.’

‘I thought as much’ Kebila burst out; ‘interpretation, if you ask me, becomes child’s play when anger seizes the national consciousness: interpretation at this hour becomes your radio and TV slots that prostitute with incumbent wrong; your milky lectures of shameful brain hijacking; while the policeman rushes to the *ngambeman* to know why the sun rises from the West.’

The atmosphere was becoming uncomfortably tense, but no one was ready to give ground except Mbimbe who for lack of what to say to the abstract dialogue, avenged himself on the bottle.

‘But what’s really there to interpret, gentlemen?’ Ndille said curtly, shrugging free of the demons who had been plaguing his bowels ever since they started the sensitive talk. ‘My humble opinion is that even to interpret rubbish betrays the desire for a way forward; but here, in this national arrangement, we’re no longer privileged to even interpret our own rubbish, and we’re comfortable with that time bomb, and time running out.’

‘That again may be stretching metaphors too far,’ Bambe observed, worried that his colleague was contradicting him even in public, ‘and then depends on who sees and says what.’

‘You think so?’ It was clear that Ndille was in the desperate mood for a fight and his fingers itched to grab a fat neck and squeeze it and because that was not available and even then would have been an ungentlemanly way of articulating difference, he instead said: ‘There’s just no way a man can interpret chaos my dear sirs. We’ve simply reinvented what the good Lord imposed divine order on, and it stares us in the face and mocks us and says, *interpret me if you can!*’

‘Like shinning shit, Prof, tha’s wha’ it is,’ Kebila snapped before the others deprived him of the opportunity, his fangs showing in an ugly smile. ‘The weevil in the national sack of corn is the

despondency of a surrendering intellectualism, toeing the line of mediocrity for preferment, regurgitating meaningless slogans of an incumbent fanfare in *se porte bien* nightmares simply because we've gotten used to the obnoxious fact that when Tiko drinks to the dregs, Kayville always staggers about drunkenly. Why must Kayville always pay the price for a sinful indulgence?

'I was never there to ascertain the facts and may not wish to stand witness where the facts of the matter are dubious,' Bambe said.

But it was Commissaire Mbimbe who left the group gaping, maybe in his capacity as night visionary for Kayville, having found his voice again, and beaming on his distinguished in-law.

'You a right-winger, an extremist, doc,' he said, quivering with laughter, 'when I thought you were a down-to-earth moderate?'

'What other language do your people know, *mon Commissaire*,' Kebila said 'apart from the language of extremism? Nails-breaking, soul-twisting, until a man's no longer a man but pulp and flushed down the ideological drain, after a futile attempt to graft a swastika brain on him.'

The five-star servant of law and order looked on almost admiringly but with the sinister glint in his twinkling eyes that has been technologically determined to be x-ray proof and so often mistaken even by those whose toes were being crushed, for evidence of kin sentiments.

'The way you put it,' he said, 'will make someone think that we live in Siberia, the unnecessary reference to Nazi extremism aside. Of course my boys have been accused of a bit of arm-twisting, and a bit of indulgence in a fringe benefit mentality, as who'll not do, in given circumstances? But I always caution them every morning before they go out, never to exaggerate, and be friendly to those from whom they pinch, you never know, and remember the ones you meet on your way up and so on. So I advise them to build bridges and not pull existing ones away, even invite their victims to the bar as a sign of man-know-man, one hand washing the other, and so on. At least that's what I do, teach by example, and so often order rounds for my friends and they insult me while hugging their bottles, but I ask them as I ask you, who shall cast the first stone? That's the backbone of charitable law-enforcing for which Kayville prides itself and has received numerous accolades.'



His flushed face was an amazing spectacle to watch, the booze had finally dragged him from his provincial closet and he was the man he was.

'Tori sweet sotey thiefman laugh for banda,' Kebila said and laughed also, suddenly.

'Not just any type of petit Common Law criminal,' the officer agreed, 'but one who self-confesses to nation-building through *kata-kata* behaviour and a passion, you see? You can give me that much and then argue for mitigating circumstances when the public tongue begins to call for heads to roll, *abi* I lie?'

He had suddenly pulled Nfor toward him and was whispering fiercely in his ear.

'Holy mother,' the other screamed disentangling himself, 'I'm not yet ready to be crucified, and at any rate, not as a deaf bloke. I'll like to *hear* the invitation into paradise, when it comes'; and pointing to Kebila added, 'take him, he's always ready!'

Dr Bambe who had been laughing uncontrollably turned to his brother in-law between sobs and said:

'I always tell you, see now, never depend on these people when you seek paradise.'

'You eat alone,' Kebila said, 'so why seek company on Golgotha?'

'Let's put it this way,' Dr Bambe said; '*s'il ya pour un, il ya pour tous.*'

'But you ask with your mouth,' Dr Ndille said, echoing a Graffi proverb he had come to love, 'for then chop with weti?'

'We'll cross that bridge when we get there,' Nfor said.

That seemed to have been the appropriate hint and *Commy* waved excitedly at the woman who heaved herself toward them immediately with the same facial favours that she dispenses on every customer.

'Someone has destroyed my character,' *Commy* said to the lady in French, curling his finger round the table and she nodded with understanding, 'another round, and make it two-two,' the last phrase in English.

She had finally understood the familiar Anglo terminology of *round* and *two-two* and *judgement*, she a *bilingue*, and danced away. Blame the Anglos for every national sin she did not care to know about, but at her *Place de la Joie* they were fair game and always ensured her

heavy purse at the end of the day, when her own brothers would spend the whole evening over a small Coke and straws weaving romantic phrases into the shinny eyes of their mistresses.

'Hey,' Dr Bambe was alarmed, 'Jesus never drugged the guy on the right and the one on the left.'

'How do you know, Doctor Book,' Kebila said, swaying in semi-drunkenness; 'were you there? Let a man be charitable when God possesses him.'

'I know my gospel, sah,' the Prof retorted.

'I see, I see,' Kebila said thoughtfully; 'then how d'you account for the fact tha' the two fellows were jolly-jolly even in the face of Roman brutality, while your man started weeping to God, tell me!'

'You're simply distorting the Word,' Dr Bambe said.

The woman brought the drinks and while she uncorked the first set there was a lull in the talk. She was aware of the eyes piercing her behind, but was already used to the transgression which, to say the least, she encouraged. She made sure she brushed a shoulder with her mass, and leaning over to make the bottle *respire* as the men urged her in unaccented French, allowed her bosom to tickle an arm that was lying on the table. The blood revolted in their veins and they were speechless for a spell until she left and knowing the state in which they were, began to scatter her cassettes all over the crowded table until she found what she wanted. Soon the men heard a new song and forgot everything about religious excursions.

*Daniel's travelling tonight on a plane...*

'Oh my God!' Dr Ndille exclaimed, 'this woman knows just when to lead a man back to paradise.'

Then he narrated the story of Ngono, his slim *Mammy Wata* with almond eyes while he was a crazy University knave, and how she had stolen his heart and for that he had drafted a poem to Eve, Primal Dame; and how every time they played that song he told her of eternity and how the daily travail, up and down Sisyphus' hill was only a necessary prelude to that everlasting bliss.

'Amen,' Dr Bambe said.

'I didn't know you were so romantic, Mola,' *Commy* said, and winked at no one in particular. The booze was already dragging him into his ancestral hemispheres where thought and word were a delirious utterance only for the initiated.

‘O, boy,’ Ndille said to the officer, ‘if you’re interested in a bit of inhuman history, that was when we still nurtured sally gardens in this country, but *your* man came and rendered everything fallow, decades in arrears.’

‘Amen again,’ Dr Bambe repeated and belched as if to confirm the charge.

‘Thereafter,’ Ndille went on without breaking his thoughts, ‘we began examining our individual and collective souls and finally knew the hand that signed the paper that fell the city and brought death to a million in mass, unmarked graves. If indeed God the father is there and the Son is again God, then who is God? And if there is divine chaos, how can we ever hope to have peace and unity in this empire?’

And he sat still as if he had never spoken.

‘Who says booze isn’t inspiring?’ Nfor said and started sing.

*Na the thing wey you give we Papa, na yi this we di drink’am so!*

Kebila joined in and croaked, *Na yi this we di drink’am so*. And in unison, Ndille joined in, *O Papa, O, make we drink’am with all your heart!*

‘So how often do you go for confession, with such ideas?’ It was the *Commy* who regarded Ndille with a cathartic shudder and mopped his moustache with a large handkerchief.

‘Confe which sion?’ Kebila barked, suddenly alarmed. He admired the silent radicalism of Ndille and would never hesitate to buy the fellow a drink even with money meant for his mother-in-law.

‘The way I see it,’ the officer went on calmly, ‘you need it.’

‘No worry about tha’ matter, my man,’ Kebila said suddenly friendly; ‘wha’ matters is the way the man sees it, and so far, nothing to worry about, eh, Prof?’ And he nudged Ndille who smiled with understanding.

But the officer would not give up, on a genuine inspiration that gripped him like a vice, and he must be delivered. Sins of the mouth as of the lips formed a conjunction against the paradisaal hammock, and there was still hope for the one sheep. So strong was Mbimbe’s Catholicism on the matter of salvation that it was almost spilling over into a Pentecostal creed, only that there were moments when the Bacchus spirit possessed his soul completely, and he was helpless.

‘Old Boy,’ Kebila said, ‘tha’ one na expired gospel. *Abi* I no be God yi son too? I get direct telephone line to heaven, you hear, so no begin worry your head for nothing!’

Nfor looked up as he spoke and for a moment there was a spark of inspiration in his eyes, and then it went out again. He was very sober now, feeling the alcohol take hold of his brains like the barbed wire around the skull of Christ. He too was being crucified in the bottle, when only a few months before he was the witty TV mastermind whose brainchild, *Patcha Word*, made him the darling of the young audience, but a crucifix had been planted on the anthill in front of the giant building for every inconvenient voice that muttered Mungo misery or made history the foreground to every crossword puzzle. He and a few other big mouths, and such big mouths they were, had scrambled off the place as from a plague, and his red lips began spitting fire across the pages of *The Bangemba Post*, militant voice of the Anglo universe, and how was he ever to rest and rest in peace while listening to official rot and witness to plebeian surrender day after day, care of the above? So he had come to the conclusion, partly through Kebila’s repeated sermons, that the way to God needed no mediator, and that his God was a Father who listens to every child, condemned or saved here below.

Suddenly he looked at *Commy* Mbimbe as if for the first time.

‘I know you belong,’ he said with a slur on his voice; ‘I can see it in your equivocal pupils, but it doesn’t matter. I go with the fellow who agrees that the only sensible thing to do now is chip out igneous from the ribs of the Fako and resurrect a memory.’

‘There he goes again,’ Kebila said and turned to Dr Bambe, suppliant: ‘The fella’s simply wobbly upstairs, doc, can you prescribe something?’

Dr Bambe gasped in shock at the very considerate appeal, caught momentarily off guard.

‘Me, you mean?’

‘Never mind about me or any other filthy-mouthed son of Mulafako,’ Nfor said; ‘as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever and ever shall be, a tinkered arrangement. If only you can read the crimson horizon, and prepare against the doom from a Fako belch. Ah, blessed are the ignorant for they shall follow the corpse into the grave! My dear Kebila you’re a jeering old fool, seeking the company of those who’re forever correct, but correct simply because they’re so colour blind they can’t see the red slashes across the horizon.’

There was a tense lull in the conversation. They were each swallowed by their thoughts. Dr Bambe was at that moment thinking about the logic of national unity and good citizenship, which he had recently been championing to a ridiculous crescendo when as head of a Party delegation to his village he had been welcomed by a hall draped in party colours but not a single soul in attendance. Predictably, his report to Yaoundé had been filled with glowing superlatives that culminated in a traditional motion of support with a thousand and one ghost signatures; Yaoundé loved signatures and he was becoming past master at gathering them. His position had been secured for the moment, but his heart was troubled. On his part Commissaire Mbimbe was already bored with the extravagance of knowledge on which both personal and state security dangled precariously, and what was he to do, accommodate such and pretend that it was a consequence of the booze or revert to his unblinking state of red alert and say who born dissident dog, and then squash the pest as he would a fly? His feet itched to crush bones and restore sanity on the tongue of the nation-man, but another voice cautioned otherwise. Although he had been accused of counteracting official orders and instead order his boys to shoot every dissident *bambey* out of sight, Mbimbe was also a man of dignity and often had his moments of inspiration, like now, when he must rein in the virulent germ in his blood, calling for blood. He shuddered into a state of dangerous calmness and watched the two rebellious brains simultaneously, for it was the responsibility of the watchful eye never to blink. God was a wonderful mechanic, he thought, making man and making it possible for him to be godly, when inspired, to be able to close his eyes and see at the same time, or one eye blink sleepily as the other watched, and alternate as such interminably. So he instead used his teeth against his second bottle and as if it were a signal, the others displayed their own unique abilities, using a cocked empty bottle against the unopened bottle or the ring on their finger.

‘Wonders shall never end,’ *Commy* Mbimbe said absent-mindedly and the others looked up as if on cue. At that moment their two neighbours on the other table were engaged in ferocious mouthing, oblivious of any notion of environmental sanity.

'I see,' Nfor said with a knowing sneer, 'so you're still tickled? Let the bloke be with his victim. Prof can provide you with a carton-full tomorrow, eh doc?'

And he nudged Dr Bambe so hard the man was slightly jolted out of his political wonderland. But why not, he thought again, why not? What if his bro in-law wished to appease his demons, why, he only had to ask, after all the same compliments were paid him whenever he stepped foot into the officer's constituency. The cheerful-givers, Bambe reflected, oh, and such *mini-mino* granddaughters of Jagua Nana, God save them, when his in-law's veritable weapon of mass destruction is let loose, alleluia, old Makuri possessed by the devil of purification in the niche of creation! Poor Bambe, he was being summoned once more to bow to the expected protocols of love and play the intermediary that was his heart's nuisance because, then, only the healthy pocket commands. But Bambe was squeamish when it came to money-for-hand-back-for-ground bargains; how could it be otherwise when he was champion of a campus tradition of give-and-take, theoretically inscribed as fringe benefits in the thankless task, trade by barter reinvented with his little darlings who were glad to have their grades, and won't allow even an honourable humiliation as *bon payeur* into his confused brains. He shuddered from hindsight, forgetting the others and piqued by memory, and recalled how in a moment of madness at the foot of the Fako, once, he had allowed his demons to crush his brains at the sight of the little girl, hardly twelve, with her tray of groundnuts chanting her songs and wriggling to rhythm. He had dragged her into the thickets and tore the veil of ablution over his shame for a glorious gush, restful. But the girl had innocently confided into the father who then dragged her to the principal's office, screaming Nyamkweh monstrosities against the institution and its inhabitants if the big man did not mollify his paternal ire. The students were summoned into the auditorium and after an eternal sermon against the weakness of the flesh, the violated stepped forward as the boys filed out in a slave gang, until there was a stampede at the door, when two hips got caught in the half-opened door just as the lad screamed, 'Papa na yi that!' And who else could it be than the red-lipped Ananias Bambe whose meritorious records during inter-college competitions in athletics

could not save him from being escorted to the gate, with a letter addressed in red ink to his parents. But he had rallied back into social shape in Kayville, where everything was possible if one knew where to tread, which doors to knock, and who could challenge his assiduity as master of ceremony when it came to bottom-belley arrangements?

But the place was being deserted, and Nfor tapped Bambe on the shoulder out of his reverie, as the incongruous group hurriedly drained their bottles and staggered to their feet. They winked at the ever smiling Madonna of the abode on their way out, as she framed the main entrance in her expansiveness with her farewell refrain, *demain donc, Asso*, and winked back, same blank cheque to her broken gallants, stumbling away.





## Chapter Sixteen

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### Voices of the Inquisition

The Departmental library was humming with the sound of students discussing their assignments, dissertation topics, or social engagements. Ngoran approached Tipoung'he and tapped his skull.

'Your turn, man,' he said with a ridiculous smile on his lips.

'What's the matter?' Tipoung'he said and closed the copy of Ionesco which he had borrowed from the library and was hoping to be through with the introduction at least before tackling his paper on Albee. But there had been a stir in the place among the graduate students who were being summoned to Dr Bambe's office. The image of Idi Amin's queues of those earmarked for execution came to Tipoung'he's mind: a gunshot, a man drops and the next in line drags the contorting body to the mass grave before taking his place for the ritual of independence ablutions.

'You better ask him when you get there' the other said, walking away to his table.

Tipoung'he kicked back his chair and went out. He wound his way through the students along the corridor and barely registered the cacophony banging against his brains, and knocked on Dr Bambe's door.

'Come in,' the voice from within.

Tipoung'he opened the door and went in. Then he closed it gently. Dr Bambe was searching for something in his drawers and did not look up.

'Ah, Mr Black Wordsworth,' Dr Ngoumbey said, 'what blissful winds blow thee hither?'

He laughed like a clash of cymbals at noon, and continued to pull at his moustache. Dr Bambe looked up and closed the drawers with a clattering impatience. He fixed Tipoung'he with a devastating stare for almost a minute, and Tipoung'he thought of Prufrock crucified on the wall.

'I'm interested in your article to *The Bangemba Post*,' Dr Bambe said without preliminaries.

Tipoung'he was not expecting this and did not know that his predecessors had been sworn to silence concerning the subject of the interview. He licked his lips and appeared foolish for a moment.

'Which, Sir?' he said.

'Aha!' Dr Ngoumbey shouted in his flying shirt sleeves, 'I told you, didn't I, that there's more to this than catches the eye! He wants to know *which*, which means there are more than one! Now I'm vindicated, say what you please.' He crossed his legs with an effort because the space between his chair and the table was too small and he had to twist sideways.

'The one on Anglophone marginalisation,' the professor said, looking into his eyes for Jungian tears.

So that was the reason for the probing, Tipoung'he thought. Could it be the Editor was a double agent as Tipoung'he had read in Hadley Chase or seen in a Bond movie, and had betrayed him and he was to be used as an example to ward off further recalcitrance? But somehow he was relieved, knowing that Dr Bambe could not summon him if the matter was not troubling him. He recalled his mate who had written a *la voix* against Dr Webote's amorous adventures that compromised standards. The fellow had been summoned to the Faculty Council to answer charges of insubordination and character assassination, and he hurriedly wrote an apology before the grilling and promised never to be an instrument of the devil again. Dr Taanwahni was furious with the apology and called the boy a coward in class and had withdrawn his support for the chap who, he insisted had to be punished more for not being sure of himself than for any unfounded allegations. Tipoung'he firmed his muscles and waited, and simultaneously went through motions of tension control, breathe in, breathe out, and none of his professors noticed it.

Dr Bambe was finally satisfied with his screening tactic of sampling the students to identify the potential rebel. He regarded the boy rather coldly, knowing that he had the power at his fingertips to transform his life into a bowl of nothing.

'It was not about marginalisation Sir,' Tipoung'he said tentatively, aware that they had not asked him to sit.

‘So what was it about?’

‘Phenomenon Sir.’

‘And what about phenomenon?’

Tipoung’he nearly committed the fatal error of smiling – after which Dr Bambe would scream, with Ngoumbey in support, that you take me for what young man, for your age mate or tribesman? – because he had looked up the word and wanted to talk about the miraculous connotations like that of the Annunciation in particular. But why even explain himself? Why not play a bit of dodging with them so that in the end they would pin him down to nought and have their conscience to answer to, if they still decided to incriminate him? He felt like a cockroach in the presence of starving cocks and why concede so easily when either way he may still be victimised?

‘Sir,’ he said addressing Dr Ngoumbey instead, ‘in your lecture on stylistics as a phenomenon discourse, you alluded to group interests as phenomenally represented by a certain accentuation of cultural mores.’ He could see that Dr Ngoumbey had swallowed the bait of flattery and although he had never mentioned any such thing in his abstract flamboyance, Tipoung’he calculated that to camouflage a bit of Dr Sigala’s rhetoric would cajole the man and once he was in that jolly state, Dr Bambe too would be easily manipulated.

‘Agreed,’ the lecturer said with bright eyes, ‘I never specified *Anglophone*, though, did I?’

‘No, Prof, you didn’t,’ Tipoung’he said beginning to relax. ‘But I thought ...’

‘You thought the wrong thoughts, young man,’ Dr Bambe said, and his voice sounded a bit tired. ‘I’ve told you people repeatedly that journalists are nobody’s friend as long as they prey on common vulnerabilities, but then what I say enters here and come out this way.’ And he boxed his ears, one at a time, and Tipoung’he expected to see blood trickle down his nostrils, but nothing happened and he continued: ‘All they do is coax you into self-betrayal and once you betray yourself, then you betray your peers, your community, and your country. In plain English, you become a traitor. Think about that, whether your degree is to serve the nation or some disgruntle vulture out there preying on tit-bits. No traitor ever comes to any good.’

Then he went on to lecture 'Tipoung'he on the fate of traitors, and singled out the Vietnamese traitor as archetypal example.

'When America invaded their country, a handful of them were deceived to betray the fatherland buoyed by the mistaken believe that the Americans loved them. But when Americans realised the impending catastrophe and doom from local traps, they scrambled out, abandoning the traitors who had been made to believe that by the end of the war, if ever, they should be American citizens. A few of them clung to the blades of the helicopter hoping that the Geneva Convention provided a shield for anyone in that state, while other wrapped themselves around the landing skid. Your guess is as good as mine, about the state of their throats when the blades slashed through, and then in mid-air the chopper swung this way and that and then nose-dived the others to perdition. That, my boy, is the price which every traitor pays and your romance with newspaper beetles is the beginning of the end for you!'

Dr Ngoumbey had been nodding like a lizard and breathing 'that's it,' or 'exactly,' until it was like an incantation, with 'Tipoung'he as the stripped victim of a curse who needed to be cleansed.

There was a gentle tap on the door and the secretary came in.

'The meeting is about to begin Sir,' he said with a slight bow.

'Okay, we'll be there in a minute,' Dr Bambe said, and the secretary withdrew without turning.

That way too, 'Tipoung'he was released and as he walked back along the corridor and stepped on the bits of paper floating about and groundnut peelings covering the place, he wondered about the encounter with Dr Bambe. Knowing that his mates were eager to know if he was the scapegoat on whose head Dr Bambe was to set one of his numerous examples, always scarecrow promises, 'Tipoung'he did not return to the library and instead walked the reeking path behind the *Nouveau Bâtiment*, where the boys relieved themselves and when the sun rose and the heat with it, the vapour which was transmitted through the shattered window panes was such sweet incense that there was no wonder why the bees converged there for a free suck. As he walked and breathed the piss, his mind went back to what Dr Ndille had told them during the initial meeting of the *Poet's Ngoumba*, which he founded, having been inspired by his own creative writing lectures, and by what he called the dearth

of an imaginative fervour that must ensure that posterity does not blunder into the cactus fence of history and political eunuchs. As budding poets and custodians of the future, Dr Ndille had said, they must suffer their restive souls to shun the bright way, the flashy sights, and the sweetened milk of lethargic society, because they'll only be trapped in the end and blinded.

'Avoid the ease of hitchhiking as much as possible,' he declared, 'and trek at the least opportunity, for in that way, your soul stays awake. You can only be witness to the perversion of your history and the rot into which your people are immersed, if you view the world in close-ups and slow motion. You have to be part of the terrain to know why the people laugh or cry, whereas zooming around in windows-tainted cars only gives you a dizzy image that is the shadow of what is.'

Tipoung'he chewed these words in paraphrase and was only then aware that they had become part of his consciousness. In search of a constituency as the young poets ventured to imagine during *Ngoumba* meetings when someone took the podium, delivered his poem and then responded to the members as they took the piece apart, at times maliciously, if only to test one's mettle, they began to define patriotism as a variable of the wretched of the earth. And why not, they argued, when the truth that descends from above is a sweetened sponge with no expiry date?

'I, the light; I, the way; I, the truth,' Tipoung'he said suddenly, and wondered why he said so. But he dismissed the nagging thought and walked on, sipping a dose of the chaos that was brewing around him as the students cut across each other's path to and from class, or to and from the resto, the forks and spoons jutting from their pockets like miniature missiles.

As he passed behind the old restaurant, whose image had graced a previous five hundred francs bill, so conscientious were the leaders then committed to inscribing the nation's landmarks on every bit of scrap, Tipoung'he was suddenly scared and stopped in his track, listening to the screams in the hall above.

'Give the kids their fill and they'll never raise a placard against you,' the President had been advised at the birth of the first Republic, and so he schemed to spoil them on a fattening diet that dulled the brains. The quarter turkey into which the teeth sank before draining

the coca-cola can and then the cup of *Camlait* as desert or an apple, especially on national feast days, and why should they even bother to study as they should, when the fastidious menu replicated paradise in the palm grove, and transformed everybody into a meekly patriot whispering *le chant patriotique*. So Tipoung<sup>3</sup> he heard these things anew, and saw them with a fresh view, and asked himself, as he stood there beneath the epicurean showers of patriotic jazz, 'What was I hearing and seeing before?' Without him being aware of it, he now realised, the trips to the restaurant, three times a day, had become stepping stones to self-knowledge. When a student's spoon clattered on the floor as he fought with his books in one hand and the laden plate in the other, a loud cry immediately filled the hall, 'Anglo! Anglo!' Tipoung<sup>3</sup> he then trembled with shame and anger and gathered his food into his mouth without feeling while the others fired back, 'Frog, Frog!'

After the meal they gathered around the taps that protruded from the wall and gushed into a concrete manger and the greased water barely trickled out below because the drain was blocked by bones and food remains. The students pushed for position like cows knocking horns for salt, and used a cupped hand to channel water into their mouths and down their throats. A Frog who could not find a spot and so was picking his teeth as consolation, smiled mischievously at Anderiya who had muscled his way to the tap and was now withdrawing and mopping his mouth and hands with a blue handkerchief.

'Yaoundé fine na *kapo*,' the Frog croaked, and his 'fan' for 'fine' made Anderiya's fist itch to smash the exposed jaw. Tipoung<sup>3</sup> he saw the dangerous involuntary movement, but the hand fell lame again.

'I came to Yaoundé and not for Yaoundé, *vandal*,' Anderiya replied and slipped in a bit of French to emphasise his Anglo perception of a Froggish mentality. They had long protested vehemently to the Dean about the attitude of the bilingual training lecturer who called them *sauvage* and wanted to know what he had to do with this *sauvagerie*. Then the students fought back and said 'bilingual formation,' not *formation bilingue*, and furious Prof Bye! swore against *les Anglois avec leur je ne sais pas quoi* monstrosities and promised them more opportunities to burn their *mandats*.

‘Mais, est-ce que je ments, *kapo?*’ the other said and jabbed his teeth with a splinter cardboard, unaware of Anderiya’s previous intentions. ‘You come up you chop couscous, you go down you chop *ndindong.*’ And again, his ‘dong’ for ‘down’ made Anderiya’s hand to tremble with the accumulated rage that repeatedly made him to ask how they ever came together, Anglos and Frogs. Not that he was a stranger to the historical abortion in nation-building that made Fouban the ridiculous landmark in the enslaving atrocities that camouflaged as patriotic tropes of post-independence. But the piece of arrogance standing in his way and picking his teeth like the embodiment of Sartre’s hell was evidence, he later told Tipoung’he, of the eternal misery to which Anglos were subjected.

‘You no go go for Bamenda again, eh *kapo?*’ and he laughed in pejorative hootings that tore at Anderiya’s entrails like a blade. That was it, as the veins stood on his face and a demonic urge seized his brains. He launched himself at the Frog who dashed away screaming, ‘*Arretez le fou!*’ But Tipoung’he and the others had held Anderiya back and he subsided eventually to a sane state.

‘Bagga!’ he spat out.

‘No mind the fool,’ Kahewi who was specialising in contentions of Kahewi vs. Kahewi said, ‘he’s a bastard victim of Napoleonic buffoonery.’

Anderiya had already come to the conclusion that only his muscles could restore his sense of identity in Yaoundé’s prolonged seasons of anomy. Whether in the endless queues at the restaurant or during *epsi*, he always said you can’t afford to be soft or be seen as soft, against a Frog mentality. They were *baggas*, he said, cowards of the first order and considering the inviting jaw bone that yapped inane cultural superiority, Anderiya would later confess how he felt the desire to serve the *bagga* a London blow. During one of their boozing sprees in high school, his friend Tsoh had blundered into a group of thugs with his girl and trying to shield her, received what he lived to describe as a London blow which left him reading his name upside down for days, reclining in the arms of his grateful girl. ‘London blow’ became the unqualified epithet for a devastating man-pass-man encounter, and was later tempered at the University by Anglos who heard in it the celebration of cultural manhood. After all, they argued, as London was there in the beginning, so shall she be present at every defining encounter till thy kingdom come.

'Bazooka for bazooka,' they exclaimed, describing the attack and counter-attack fireworks across the football field as the inflated leather was knocked around. That was what they were doing, Tipoung'he thought, listening to the verbal missiles crisscross the hall, or any other arena where the horns of difference interlocked, insulting and defining ideological blocks. The Frogs were no descendants of Master Bull Frog though, and assumed an ostentatious pose that fell apart under the slightest shock. And the Anglos, *toujours gaucher*, were experts at shock therapy, administering appropriate doses at the appropriate moments, and the Frogs almost always faltered.

Tipoung'he remembered the evening they were crowded in the Foyer to watch the evening news on TV, the latest technological wonder that left New Deal spin doctors sleepless over phrases about the Government's goodwill toward the people in the coming millennia. But the news was delayed and a wildlife documentary came on the large screen. There were monkeys skipping about and mating with ferocious abandon, and the usual cry of derision went up in unison, 'Anglos, Anglos!' And even as they yelped, suddenly, the lens shifted to a swampy undergrowth where huge toads skipped about, chunks of which Obi Okonkwo would have loved for a last supper, and as if vindicated the rival shout followed, enthused by the ocular proof, 'Frogs, Frogs!' The human frogs had never felt such collective enthusiasm in the others' voices and were suddenly hushed by the possibility of what they feared.

'*Kapo*, dis-moi,' one stout fellow said to Anderiya, 'donc c'est ça que vous appelez Frog, dis non!'

'Of course,' Anderiya said; 'donc tu ne savait pas?'

The other was flabbergasted and turned to his friend and muttered disconsolately, 'Gar, allons.'

That seemed an eternity ago, as Tipoung'he crossed the basketball court, his mind in rewind, and through the hostels, and began descending into Moussadiy, that veritable Vanity Fair of the country's town planning abortions, the real heart of the capital. Part of University land left fallow, all sorts of real estate adventurers had tried their hand at architectural designs, having secured fake land titles, and soon the list of landlords ranged from cobblers to colonels and University dons. And soon too, Sadiy, as its faithful associates



described it, became the indisputable capital of the capital, the Vatican of Rome, where every commodity from rusty gas plates to a fresh human head could be bought and sold, provided the right contacts were made, some in rooms partitioned as market stall. Midnight churches were the latest sensation, men and women in overflowing gowns and walking bare-footed and muttering God's grace into dark corners, and Tipoung'he went through it with a sickening feeling. His head was reeling and he wanted to lie down and shut out the nauseating images from his mind.

His *mini cite* was unusually quiet for that time of the day, but he did not even notice such strange sounds of silence. He switched on the light and remembered Nyieh's warnings about his sight. But what could he do since the narrow corridor that separated the two blocks had no light sheets so that his window was more a formality than a necessity. It was supposed to be on the opposite wall, but that would mean letting in the stench from the lake behind their residence. And already his eyes ached and he squinted and saw rings around the moon or more slices of the new moon.

As he was about to close the door his neighbour called from her room opposite. Miss Kuissiy, as she insisted everyone call her, was a very tidy girl whose beauty was ruined by her complete submersion into the mystery between Genesis and Revelation, and swore only according to one of the new religious wonders that took Sadiy hostage, and what a waste, the boys said, what a total waste, and Miss Kuissiy was the richer for all their mournful outbursts, and safe too. She prided herself as God's parcel and warned: 'Let no one covert what is God's, except by a revelation.' She had finally given up on hopes of dragging Tipoung'he to her church, which met at night only because they had to make provision for Caesar's own agenda. But today she wanted to know more about Hardy's will as part of her preparation for an expose. They talked for almost an hour when suddenly she wanted to know about his idea of love and to know if it did not come from God.

'A midnight God and love?' He looked at her half-mockingly; 'I can't imagine such tinkered love.'

'It doesn't matter,' Miss Kuissiy said, her Mary Magdalene face marred by a woeful sense of doom. She was troubled by his justification of Hardy on the basis of personal salvation. 'God's

love is all that matters and all other things come from it. Without that you can't even talk of love whether of your parents, your siblings and children, and your friends.'

'Tipoung'he was inclined to agree with her but knew that soon, it would encourage her to describe abstractions to him and call them divine love. Besides, he believed that love was love only to the person who described it, Christian or pagan or agnostic.

'It may be so,' he said, 'but for my part, I can't define love, not even love of self. Any attempt to do so falsifies love itself.'

'But no one is asking you to define love,' she said a bit angrily. A student of Bilingual Letters, her English was without an accent and having returned from Leeds where she and her mates did their internship, she switched code so effortlessly it was sad to imagine a non-bilingual country beyond the rhetoric of its leaders. 'All you need to do,' she was saying, 'is submit your sense of love unto the Lord's. What's so difficult about that?'

'Everything that has to do with prescriptive and homogenous emotions,' Tipoung'he said even at the risk of being accused of being unnecessarily bookish.

'Why can't you just accept Christ as your Lord and Saviour,' she said. Her voice faltered and Tipoung'he thought her eyes watered. 'Just imagine him on the cross for your sake; how in those days the nails were so crude that they tore through his flesh. Imagine the pain, the anguish, and all that for you and me.'

'For you, maybe,' he said, 'but not for me.'

'You mean Christ didn't die for your sake?'

'No, he didn't die for my sake. In fact, I'm beginning to believe that he died for *his* sake.'

Then Miss Kuissiy did something unexpected that shocked Tipoung'he. She screamed for her 'sister' and banged on the wall at the same time.

'Qu'est-ce qu'il ya?' It was Giselle from her room.

'Vien, pardon,' Miss Kuissiy pleaded, 'votre Anglo-ci me depasse!'

Giselle found Miss Kuissiy saying a prayer to herself, repeating *Seigneur* as often as she was breathing, and observed her till she said amen. In a few words, Giselle learned of Tipoung'he's heresy, and was as shocked as her sister in Christ, but quickly regained her equanimity, remembering the parable of the lost sheep. She had

been preparing to go for her youth counselling programme in church, but now that must wait, if it must, for her to tackle 'Tipoung'he afresh. She teased him about the ultimate realisation that there is indeed God when he has spent his life denying the fact. 'Tipoung'he's frown stopped her and she looked on, expectant.

'No,' he protested, 'I've never been against the fact of God's presence or Christ's existence. Only, I hate the confusion over the two on which Christians of all creeds depend.'

'Can you be more explicit, please?'

'If Christ is the Son of God,' he declared, 'and Christ as Son becomes God, I can only say that from my cultural background, God is no more and Christ is today his successor. Thus far, I can understand Christ as Son and as God.'

But Giselle was not going to be shell-shocked by a mere mental show like Miss Kuissiy, she was always ready to put up a fight for her Lord and King and so went into a passionate lecture on acculturation and its ability to build new bridges where cultural exclusivity has become obsolete. Why was he refusing to see when it was so clear, even the blind could see! 'Tipoung'he listened and wondered who was *really* blind between them, with gaping eyes that were sightless. So he decided to relent, let the opponent feel that she is winning and then you defeat her through her own illusion, a dependable tactic.

'But you know it's such a burden to believe,' he said and a bright look came into Giselle's eyes. She turned this over in her mind, and seemed to be turning in pain with her thoughts, before replying.

'The Lord died that your burden be no more, however heavy,' she said.

'Amen!' Miss Kuissiy said, trembling slightly.

The same old phrases, same imagery, forever monotonous. 'Tipoung'he felt terribly bored with it all, the logic of the defeated, unaware of their fate. The consolation of fear, and why should he be afraid of his own body and soul?

Then he said: 'And faith, even in God, is a gradual thing, you know,' forcing a serious note in his voice. No need to erect fences, he thought, at least not yet.

'That's the whole point of believing, brother,' Miss Kuissiy pointed out with relief in her watery eyes. 'You only have to persevere even as the Lord did on the cross for our sins.'

‘That’s right,’ Giselle chained up, not willing to let go the flickering light of hope beginning to show in ‘Tipoung’he’s words. ‘It’s not your battle to fight, nor your burden to carry; it’s the Lord’s. All you need to do is surrender your will to His will, and ask Him to do your wish.’

But he also knew what they could never imagine, that it was his struggle alone, to believe or not to believe. Even God on his throne or wherever, could only sit and watch, and await the outcome of his decision, which He knows already in his omniscience. Even then, it was not a decision based on the possibilities of a yes and a no, but a conclusion already known at the twilight moment of his creation, if indeed God were omniscient and omnipresent. Why introduce democratic individualism in a theocratic paradise where man’s ability was only the appendage of knowledge beyond knowledge? The omni-identity makes God and kills Him in one breath, gives Him power that is powerless, except contextually applied. Ah, the burden of belief and acknowledgement! ‘Tipoung’he’s head whirled and his heart cried for calm. He shuddered at the mere thought that the girls were already brothing his soul, but how was he to continue and still make them gullible to the fact of his possible reformation? Looking at Miss Kuissiy, and her beautiful lips pouting *Christ mon Seigneur*, he felt a weakness that knew no limits, and could very easily surrender his soul to the devil for a piece of paradise from her full lips, but would she accept his yarn of divine inspiration, a revelation, even if he was not already aligned?

‘Still,’ he said, ‘it’ll take time, you know, it always takes time.’ He sounded like a man about to wave the white flag and so was negotiating for better terms at armistice.

‘We know that, we’ve all been there,’ Giselle said. ‘Only remember that everyone has sinned, but there’s no better moment to start than now, else you’ll keep on procrastinating.’ She looked at him with a supplicating smile that could have melted his bones and gently squeezed his hand at the same time. ‘Are you ready to give your life to Christ?’

He was alarmed anew and his imagination bolted. Soft words of the Siren whispering watery love, oh Delilah scheming around his head with her clippers saying I’ll make myself supreme by making you a gentleman.

‘When?’ he said from the distance.

‘Now, because tomorrow may be too late,’ she said with apocalyptic undertones.

‘Why force me to say a lie?’ He was again bolting despite his efforts to appear subdued. ‘I can please you by saying that for which I’ll never be committed.’

‘You may get hit by a car as you cross the road,’ Miss Kuissiy said, picking the thread where Giselle left off, as if he had not spoken. They were such parallel minds streamlined on a logic that admitted no shortcuts.

‘It’s my faith though,’ he said without care, ‘that God loves me the way I am, without definitions.’ He was aware of sounding pedantic already, but a man must make his point if he must also shame the devil, poor fellow. ‘I don’t even know who I am; it’s the Lord’s burden, as my creator, to know that. I’m a mystery to myself, and how can I pretend to know the ways of God?’

Giselle looked at Miss Kuissiy who seemed to say I warned you, did I not? She wanted to say something, never ready to give up fighting for the Lord’s army, but Tipoung<sup>2</sup> he heard the familiar scratch on his door as the key rattled in the hole and thanked his stars for Nyieh, whose *bakala* head he could see through the lace blinds of Miss Kuissiy’s window.

‘Sorry girls,’ he said getting up, ‘I must go now; we’ll continue next time.’ They saw Nyieh as complacent and selfish and she despised them with womanly dread, as a result.

Even as he went out before they had time to make a more concrete appointment, he knew that next time may be as good as never. The Christianity he denied was part of the screen he was fighting to stay alive and as sane as possible.

*I don’t believe that heaven waits for only those who congregate.*

The words of the song came to him with renewed assurance, and he hugged them even as God’s voice came to him through the lyrics, and he was consoled, he the other son of God, black brother of Christ. He was not afraid of his affirmations, having learned at times to set off impulsively without direction and then find himself on the right track, or at least hope to find himself on the right track. That too is life, an adventure of hope, never predictable, beyond definite definition, and a crass logic was inevitable when it comes to perceiving God.

At that moment, when a sudden silence overcame him and his life dissolved into an emptiness, he crossed the threshold of belief. Eli, Eli, he cried, and his heart stood still, his soul was empty, waiting to be filled. He heard the resounding echoes from the distance, overhauling resolve. He cried with primal energy, but something gagged his throat and only hoarse whispers of his own humiliation mocked him. Faint echoes of humiliation, when he thought his heart was full of knowledge of his own confidence. How was he to sidestep the converging forces flapping their albatross wings against his ears and clamouring against his heart, how! With a last unearthly effort he lunged across the blurred space, cried again without sound, and Nyieh's arms opened and he heard God's voice simultaneously saying peace, peace son of mine.

She looked at him as if he were a stranger, her dark soul-searching eyes screwed together by a thousand question marks and her little lips trembled a bit.

'What was it this time?' she said still holding him, 'still hoping to drag you along for a second baptism?'

He smiled weakly, remembering all the headaches they have had over the issue of sprinkling water and of communion.

'No, not baptism,' he said, 'but my soul, totally committed, brainwashed and unquestioning. Isn't that immoral?'

'What?'

'The way they're encouraging me to prostitute myself.'

'That's not prostitution, man! Why do you always have to drag things out of themselves and shred them into meaningless subjectivity? I don't like their ways, but you don't have to distort so much to justify yourself.'

Her voice was hard, but she was not denying him. He looked at her in wonder, the sudden eruption of what he knew was her love for him, trying to steady him.

'Then how do you define the attempt for me to skip from one church bed to the next, all in the name of God, with me as the sheep?'

'Why do you always twist things in this nasty way,' she said, letting him go with a push, 'always to suit yourself. The girls believe in what they're doing, that it's the right thing to do, and if you don't agree say so without degrading them.'

'I'm degrading no one who is not already turned coat.'

'You are, and that's brute patronising!'

'Why are you taking sides against me?'

'Not against you, but against the way you put things. At times you sound like Mister Know-All, and the rest of mankind must listen to you pontificate.'

She was slicing the onion and the knife sounded against the board like a stab to his heart and he winced. Still he will press home his point.

'All I say is that it wearies me the way man is suddenly isolated in these our holy end-days. You go to church and all you notice is the very rich occupying the front seats with bags of money as if to bribe God.'

'You don't go to church to *see*, man,' and she turned and stared at him like a violation; 'you go to *listen* to the word of God, and *believe*.'

'Of course I know all of that and the rest of the appendages never admitted: the word that must be bought and sold. The highest bidder is given the most blessing. Where is your Christ in the temple with the whip, against functionary piety, feather-coated? Those to receive the lashes are the Synod members and Party gurus, if you ask me. Blessed are the rich for they shall be given more and camel passage into heaven even as the poor are deprived of their mites to erect more human gods. There is no sin that can't be washed away with bags of money. The blood of Jesus has been replaced by green leaves, and God is supposed to understand and bless the giver, even if the smoke is Cain's. In God we trust my dear is as good as in gold we rust or lust. Fortunately, today, sacrifices are no longer burned and God's bankers, whether in the Bishop House or in Buea, determine who is ripe for paradise. But the question I ask is, what percentage of good can assure me of heaven, or what percentage of evil can send me to perdition? I asked Miss Kuissiy and she doesn't know because her God is a God of love and forgiveness who never turns His back on the truly repentant and therefore doesn't work according to percentages and averages. And so week after week we indulge in passions that certainly make God sick, and on Sunday hope to be washed as white as the lamb. Is God such a fool, to listen to you weeping and say, it's okay child, only

for you to leave church and start all over again till the week runs out just as you rush to church to be cleansed? A divine healer, God must be mad with a careless humanity playing *njamo* with spirituality. That's not the God I seek, who is patterned by human fear and bias, a convenient mystique that resolves nothing as long as we keep on reinventing him in convenient shades of tolerance or intolerance. Better stand as sinner in the eyes of God and be burned if I must, than pretend purity, which is only a human façade to holiness.'

She had paused in her cooking and was watching him still as a rock, her hands lame by her sides, wondering. It was almost impossible to ignore him at times, and even less to quarrel with the truth of his facts, only that he insisted too much. His passion was his conviction and she pitied and loved him at once, subdued and fighting not to be subdued. Idealism and fact never share a glass, but it was useless telling him so.

'Why should I go to church in search of God when that very institution, in its horrible mutation, takes me away from God with monstrous self-confessions? The traditional churches are baffled by the Pentecostal earthquake rocking the limbs of Peter and the multiplication of abuse is on the rise everyday in true churches, the very true churches, the only true churches, the ultra true churches, with Jesus or Christ or God as epithets of gross prostitution.'

She suddenly leaped forward and clasped him in her arms because she knew he was suffering from a heartache, even as he talked rubbish; she could feel his soul was tormented by the need for a truth that was the faith he insisted on questioning. She could feel his heart bouncing against his ribs and she had to rehearse lulling a child to sleep with soft repetitions of *sshhhhh*, and he calmed down, his head against her bosom.

'You can't change a thing,' she said soothingly, 'so why try to kill yourself?'

'That's the problem,' he said, looking into the eyes that were suddenly full of compassion; 'I don't wish to change a thing, only I don't want to be changed because I don't think I'm wrong. I no longer trust the change that will come through the church. It's my soul that I wish to save, Nyieh, and not change the church and not even you, and I can't do that by pretending to believe in what I doubt.'



She felt like weeping when he became so personal and confessional, and clung to him as if for her own survival. At times she doubted the strength of her own faith and wondered if he was not convincing her gradually. But why should he be the one to kick the church door off its hinges when even those who doubted still filed in and out without contradicting the institution? With no answers to her own worries and unwilling to instigate him into further adumbration of matters that were better left untouched, she pushed him gently onto the lone chair and sat on his laps, still clinging to him.



## Chapter Seventeen

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### The Bait and a Noose

For the second time that week, Tipoung<sup>he</sup> was summoned to see Dr Bambe. He searched the whole horizon of his universe for the least indicator of what to expect, but nothing explained the summons, so he knocked gingerly on the door. He had won a prize for his poems, which he had submitted to the Wirngam Ngaadungri Society, a rim of papers and three pens, black, blue and red, symbolically meant to let the God of Fako come alive in him the emcee said, and Tipoung<sup>he</sup> thought to himself, no, the God of Ndamnyeh first. Nyieh had been sleeping when he returned from the ceremony and when he told her she hugged him and said well done my boy, well done! But that could not be the reason why he had been called for, to congratulate him?

‘Come in,’ Dr Bambe’s voice sounded like a bell and Tipoung<sup>he</sup> went in and closed the door behind him.

‘Ahh, see who’s here!’ Dr Bambe said with an exaggerated expansion of his arms, as if to hug Tipoung<sup>he</sup> but only waving to a chair, ‘please sit down.’

Tipoung<sup>he</sup> perched on the hard edge of the chair, his heart pounding against his ribs like Lehwahri’s bellows, *woup-woup, woup-woup*, and he opened his mouth to let the tension out.

‘I’m sure,’ the professor said, and lowered his voice as he said so, ‘you’ve heard of the patient dog and the fattest bone?’

‘Yes sir,’ Tipoung<sup>he</sup> said, almost laughing at the mundane inquiry, ‘but also of the possibility of famishing to death if the patience is endless.’

‘Well, in this case,’ Dr Bambe said, ‘the architects of doom have failed. But tell me, why were you never interested in going in for a *concour* like most of your mates?’

Was this an interview and a trap at the same time? 'Tipoung'he's mind whirled into a hurricane for answers, and he searched the face opposite for a tell-tale, but found none. The glistening jowls only trembled in blank contentment and he had to confess the truth.

'I couldn't sacrifice my studies sir,' he said and for once hated the truth. It was like a confession, when there was nothing to confess about, a humiliating act of exposure to the other's ambiguous scrutiny.

But like the tempter he was beginning to be, Dr Bambe goaded him into dragging the past to the surface of the present, of how he had longed to become a journalist more than anything else, but was scared of what money would do to his love to study when the money started coming in at the end of the month. No doubt his people had been disappointed and Anderiya said he was scared of assuming responsibility. But how was he to tell them that another voice rapped the back of his mind always, insistent, and that he could only listen and submit. He talked ordinarily, but as Dr Bambe listened, and making sense of it in his own chosen way, he began to understand the boy's verses that had been presented to him as one of the jury members for the Wirngam Ngaadungri Society. He did not know at that time whose work he was reading, but how could he have been so ignorant, after listening to the naughty journalists just a few days before then!

'In a sense, then, continuing here was only secondary to becoming what you wish to be?' Dr Bambe sounded apologetic and understanding at the same time.

'Yes, sir,' Tipoung'he confessed again, 'but more complementary too.'

'I'm always suspicious of complementary relationships, what do you think,' Dr Bambe said.

Tipoung'he was lost; he did not know which way they were going, and stammered inaudibly. That too was a way of answering without committing oneself.

'In any case,' Dr Bambe went on, 'and believe you me, such relationships may just be about to pay off in your case. I've been delegated to inform you that you've been selected by the Department as its candidate for the *Formation de Formateur* program this year.'

Tipoung'he was stunned into silence and stared through Dr Bambe at the wall behind him on which he saw pictures of actors and actresses on an Elizabethan stage wriggling into one another, horrible contortions of human decency, the one with a red nose dancing on his toes in a *dzap-dzap* sway, and the hairless head of Shakespeare staring down on them like God's eye. Tipoung'he digested the news but his head was rioting and he barely followed Dr Bambe's continuous talk. He did not even know he was eligible for such a scheme, yet here he was, soon to be walking the pavements of ... ah! That was it, he did not even know where he was destined to be 'formed,' and he was already constructing wild castles in the air. He was forced to climb down to where Dr Bambe had been explaining 'the exigencies of the program' to which he was expected to bow.

'The English,' he said, 'are a simple but very strict people; don't mess about with their cottage and they'll let you be.'

So it was England, Tipoung'he said to himself, imagining Shakespeare's baldness, Hardy's bushy mouth, and Lawrence's squinty eyes that saw more than the Hubble space telescope. He was switching allegiance from Hardy to Lawrence in a complementary way that played on causal ironies of Victorian morality. Hardy was to be the cue, and Lawrence the stimulus.

'Do you understand what that means?'

Toipoung'he looked up with a start, he had not been following Dr Bambe's briefing and was at a loss.

'Sir?' he said a bit sheepishly.

'The Magna Carta I mean,' Dr Bambe said, 'do you know its significance within the ambit of the Common Law context?'

Yes, Tipoung'he had heard of it in high school history, but as an historic fact that led to unparalleled liberties. He shook his head and Dr Bambe took time to explain its 'context' as the reason why the British don't need a constitution, did Tipoung'he know that? Before he could say yes or no, the lecturer fired on, and finally concluded that a people's liberty depends on how they define it, anyway. It is not always that what is good for the garner must be so for the goose.

'So while we strongly urge you,' he said, 'to make the best of this opportunity, you also have to be careful what you say out there. I've been there, you know, and I know what I'm saying. Those people

are dangerous the way they screw information out of you. If it were positive information that they're after, no problem, but you see, they're never interested in that. We're always the black sheep of human civilisation, and will forever remain as such, that's their premise. (And Tipoung'he wanted to ask extravagantly, *à qui la faut, Prof*, but decided to listen). So while you talk and discuss with them, dine and wine, and even go after their *small ngondèrès*, beware of what you say and in what way. Every people have got their dirty linen and the Department counts very much on your sense of patriotism to protect its image and that of the fatherland.'

Tipoung'he was suddenly hypnotised, listening, the patronising father weaving new cobwebs over his eyes, and feared he was going to swoon. How those words blocked out the sun that Tipoung'he was beginning to see on the horizon! *La patrie et à nous la gloire!* Such patriotic smoke filtering into the soul of man, through every available opening, suffocating and playing the Eppesse ace, or else you were a confirmed and therefore condemned nihilist. Whereas he, the hypothesis of patriotism all along in thought and in deed, sleeping and waking the patriot, singing and crying the patriot, eating and drinking the patriot, but refusing the patterned way. How could he when the dream of the patriot was being abstracted into a passionate lecture on the principles of patriotic license? Show unconditional love to the fatherland when he was still to know where he belonged? He felt like throwing up for patriotism and its national day hypnosis. Because they had identified his Achilles heel, they were sweating to shine hoofs of steel for his vulnerable moment, the rites of passage. But Dr Bambe was reiterating himself in conclusion, consumed by his own patriotic blindness, and suddenly Tipoung'he felt the weight of the colossal shadow in which he had been walking all his life. His mind was wandering away even as he nodded to Dr Bambe, and racing after a revealed sense of himself and the peace of knowledge. He looked at the caricature of himself with his brains turned inside out, and knew finally that he had been reciting the national paternoster backward!

When he finally left the office, Tipoung'he walked through the boisterous crowd of students with no thought of where he was going. He noticed no one but his own isolate soul seeking a foothold where only yesterday he stood firm as a rock, the cornerstone to

himself, and heard no sounds except the vacant pounding of his heart. He stumbled on blindly, embracing the conjured vacancy of his being, the numb feeling of non-existence in his country projecting him forward to nowhere.

But somehow, eventually, he found himself in his room and collapsed on the bed with abandon. Where had he been and where was he going, and why? The question kept on twisting itself in his violated brain, and the more he pondered over it, the more desperate he became. He fetched for his B. B. King and with feverish hands manipulated the cassette buttons and surrendered his soul, whatever remained of it, to the mournful strings. If they did not recuperate his shattered heart and suture it back to the original state, nothing else would, and how was he to survive in these disparate winds blowing from the lips of man? He listened to the soothing twang, until he could breathe again and then to another whose title he did not know but it did not matter. He was listening to his conjured soul mate invoked by the suppliant voice, customised into his troubled mind where the bitterness gathered like a storm. He too had searched the empty sky to find the reason why the sound of his tongue was said to be an awful sin in a united country, with a million etceteras as evidence, stared at everlasting hate that often camouflaged as slogans of brotherhood. He had felt the effect over the years and knew it was meant to be the francophonisation of his body and now the scholarship offer was tightening strings of falsehood around his soul. The unblinking soul dulled through tubes of *chococam* glory to the fatherland, thrashing gimmicks of a Takimistic consciousness, until Dr Bambe came in, sleek fatherly tongue, as the last witness before the cockcrow!

Was it not Auden who vowed that evil multiplies in the heart of the wronged? No Samaritan liturgies would appease hungry mouths at the Lord's Table, so why, why Lord? And was he to remain silent in complicit love and understanding, turning the other cheek and saying as it was in the beginning? Oh, such chaos of thought, and the sweat broke on his brows, feverish in the grips of his own thought. To turn the other cheek was Christ's will and the preacher was becoming hoarse in his entreaties, but 'Tipoung' he was hearkening to a new voice, for if Christ was correct with his love and forgiveness, it does not mean Moses discarded of these virtues

when he decreed for the other's eye to be plucked out. The one right and the other correct, and where then was the difference, when love was the common element? Arrogance of the offender vindicated Moses and in the end, Peter, the rock of Christ, declared his allegiance for Moses amidst plebeian calls for blood. So Tipoung'he argued and quarrelled with himself, took a stubborn stand and conceded when necessary, still querying the Lord, why Lord?

But he still had to finish his presentation for the next day, the sudden thought cutting across the flow of misery. Dr Ngamchuo had given him the topic deliberately, and said so, after he deciphered 'The Purloined Letter' as a research stimulus, not just a lost-and-found story. The new topic on the state of African literature had no leeway to interpretation, so Tipoung'he allowed his mind the freedom he sought. He was always after confluences, and despised the straight paths of disputation that made the obvious to become a piece of mundane logic. He loved the question marks and planted them where others were contented with a period. Slowly, he disentangled his body from the invisible presence, dragged himself out of bed and switched on the fluorescent bulb. He blinked as the bulb shivered into a soft glow, and reached for his anthology and opened to the page where he had marked with a lantana. The poem jumped at him with warm arms and he licked his lips and began to read first silently and then aloud, allowing every emotion in every verse to penetrate his open soul, and for no particular reason, he heard Kebila's voice from a distance puffing smoke as punctuational decoys to the conscious mind. The whole world was in those short verses that seemed to skip after one another, celebrating identity and enacting a stubborn ritual of change, the myth of a people who drink gin, sing sin, and jazz June! Oh, God's own Word at the beginning of times, let the growth come when it will, but before then the world needs to know what it has refused to know, always insisting on its own knowledge as normative. The shoe of slavery can only be described by the plantation slave, and how was the master to begin assuming testaments of soothing words that are beautiful but empty? Hooray to the stubborn soul in whose pupils patriotism stands accused and the nibbled past resurrected with a surreal pride.



Tipoung'he was amazed by his fluency as the paragraphs grew from his nib and seven pages after he was rounding up, seeking out the loose ends and clipping them in place. He contemplated and finally gave in to the tempting extravagance of a postscript, why not, if it led to new confluences and involved the planting of new question marks that may ripple their own headaches interminably. So he sought a new meaning in the female voice on the page vibrating across the Atlantic back to *our* neo-colonial space, a summons to reflect on the good, the bad, and the ugly of a masculine colonialism, commercialising gender and not knowing that in the end that commercialised voice would stand out and sing the embarrassing song of identification. He read the two paragraphs of the section over and over, not really convinced with the flow of the argument. But then, he concluded, at times a written mistake in a work becomes the focal point fruitful criticism. Or you write anything about the future and centuries after, when the world must have reinvented itself, people will call you a prophet. Time fulfils everything, and no voice is wasted.

He quickly cleared his table, not ready to entertain Nyieh's jibes, if she came in, about his 'pigsty of a table.' He was hungry but not willing to go to her place, made a heavy cup of ovaltine and dipped his gateau in it, and tried not to think of Dr Bambe again. Their meeting had stayed at the back of his mind and not even Beebee Kay and Brooks could erase the marks of the don's jocular mannerism from Tipoung'he's mindplates. For a moment he contemplated praying and the thought was a shock for he could not remember the last time he did that. But what was he going to say to God? Thank Him for the intelligence from Dr Bambe that He drives away the fly for the tailless cow? Or implore Him for a clear mind in his moment of doubt and confusion? Everyone has their Gethesemane and in a moment of doubt God speaks and acts mysteriously. He was truly confused and disturbed and because of that, tired too. Was there any sense in praying to God when tired and not in the mood? If God were there, then surely He would understand? So he crawled into bed, closed his eyes and thought out his prayer, a short statement as to a friend that father, surely you'll understand God? And he felt happy that he did not pretend to be in the mood when he was not. Of all the sins, he could not

bear the thought of deceiving God, whoever and wherever he was, pretending and thinking that God will not know, and wondered if that was a sin. And soon he was thinking of God in dreamland, from feathery cycles, oblivious to the night sounds that kept Sadiy awake in an eternal vigil.

In class the following day, confining what was past to the past, he was the second to present his exposé, and took his time to read with deliberate slowness. His mates were piling their missiles, but he did not want to imagine the barrage against him; and about to round up, the group gasped at his 'postscript' which opened a debate on woman's country or country without woman, traded or exiled, if she must insist otherwise.

One of the questions addressed to him was from Berinyuy who wanted to know if the postscript was necessary. She was very intelligent and no one cut corners unnecessarily where she was concerned.

'Gross exa,' another said.

'Do you question its presence or its essence?' Tipoung'he said and noticed a faint smile of the lecturer's face.

'Both,' Ngoran said.

Tipoung'he looked up at the lecturer but her face was now a blank wall without expression. He tried to explain himself, and got entangled in the web of his own construction, that yes, he was insinuating something that falls out of the ambit of his presentation but still relevant to the wider debate.

'The difficulty,' he went on, 'which I must admit I can't resolve now, is my response to an African art form in need of rehabilitation.'

'And who'll do the rehabilitation, you?'

The mocking tone was devastating to his thoughts, but he would not allow even that derail him.

'No, not I alone, but all of us, if possible.'

'And what if it's a counterfeit, this attempt to rehabilitate?'

Although they were close friends, Ngoran could be a nagging challenger, if only for the gallery.

Tipoung'he answered quickly, without actually knowing why: 'It will depend on who defines the counterfeit for us. In literary production and criticism falsehood is always relative to the overall circumstance of the narrative and its nuances. Even a creative blunder can become a fruitful sanctuary for meaning.'

‘Granted,’ Ngoran said carelessly; ‘but you mentioned commercial practices that disinherit the female. Don’t you think that in the traditional context of your analysis, that’s the only right thing to do, given that the two options for the people then were taking responsibility for the home by the man and breeding for the woman? This latter necessarily had to take the form of a transaction.’

‘Tipoung’he smiled even though he was uneasy, unsure if what he had in mind made any sense.

‘No,’ he said; ‘in fact, I think the practice is the alibi of patriarchy, not only here but also after the discourse of the Middle Passage. It has stayed in the subconscious of the Afro-American woman for instance, and makes her to be suspicious of even the goodly male approach, whether of lover or husband, and even of father or son. In Africa, on the other hand, the practice has been intensified, I think, through the phases of colonialism, independence, and neo-colonialism, when the woman is generally considered as a wife and mother only. Rare cases of say the intellectual woman (and he glanced at the lecturer again) make the man to panic into a defensive posture. All this because the woman is believed to have no country, wherein is expressed the commercialisation of her person; she belongs to anywhere and to anyone who only has to be willing to pay for her and then own her. So she can get married out of the village, even country, while the male child is *expected* to marry only from the tribe. While she is uprooted and deprived and may fly with the winds to the four corners of the globe, he clings to the taproot in honour of the family name, empowered. In the end, inheritance is a masculine design that in my humble opinion only dislocates the family and society, polarises them. And because of this, I should also add that I don’t know much about what you refer to as the traditional context of any analysis anymore.’

‘Are you suggesting a form of good riddance then,’ Berinyuy said, her tiny eyes blinking *maquillage* rainbows that curled onto her tongue and induced sleep; ‘or a patriarchy that disowns the woman in the name of love?’

Even without asking for explanations and reflecting on what she had uttered, ‘Tipoung’he could imagine the rest, so keen were the students, he included, to express themselves according to the latest theories, which qualified each breathe with a harsh *ism*, that the ‘how’ mattered more than the ‘what’ as long as a didactic something was slipped into the phrase.

No, Tipoung'he said again, glad to sound genuinely confessional, and felt reprieved from the consequences of his own imagination. He was not to be trapped into a slough of *isms*, some of whose vocabulary, like the Structuralism tree whose fruits Dr Takim fed himself and his family with and would not give his copy of de Saussure out for fear his wife would abandon him as a result of the penury that may ruin him if the text got missing; and yet, for Tipoung'he, the theory was like the husk after the creative juice had been squeezed out of the fruit. But Tipoung'he steadied himself and poured out what he meant or tried to mean, the gender structuring of the family fortune that rippled into our literature in particular, and subsequently into our criticism. The genderisation of creative and critical impulses resulted from a male-conceived order, say in Nyenmechop for instance, where the Fon appealed to his ancestors through Qwang, to make available more *free* children. Those were his children, the Fon said, and his notables, skirting the holy ground in a semi-circle, nodded and grunted in generous affirmation. The stray child, conceived out of wedlock, was the local mystery, child with only mother, mother with no country. The cycle of meanings and identities, eventually gave birth to Ngwi-Qwang, the pearl of Earth goddess, in whose eyes the men divined their fate, and how were they to say no, turn and run away before the moment of doom? So they heaped insults on her, and eventually drove her into insanity, unearthly beauty of unknown woman, and thereafter stole her womb in repeated violations, as her shrine became a common ground for rogues whose whip subdued the babbling soul. The free child then, preferably female, and invoked in yearly rituals on the banks of Qwang, courted the stranger from his land, or was sent 'away' after her first menstruation, as emissary into the manly world, the swallow that detects seasonal colours across the horizon. And imaginatively, riddles of the palace bard talked of the mercies of ancestors, the supporting pillar of the homestead, and the lintelled eyebrows of man, forever guarding the family shrine. The folktale, the myth, the epic, all celebrate man's focus, how he alone is the testifier, on whose shoulder the burden of history repeatedly resurrects. All this was common knowledge, only that after the white man came with his book, and showed the people new frontiers and new boundaries of

representation, the local lore changed, the dance steps altered, and the receding horizons again captured woman in flight, free of will, or for convenience purposes, a commodity for barter brokers, no schooling for her except for value adding reasons, while the man groans under his usual burdens. Nwoye must learn how to wield the sword of manhood, search abroad and gather yams for the family barn, ancestral staff-bearer, and cursed if he must tarry near the woman's fireplace. But his sister, Ezinma, whose Christian name was to be Beatrice many decades later, must be audience to nightly tales that shall be passed onto countless generations, and urged by a hoary tongue to sit like a woman, how dare her indulge a male posture! Monitored on a daily basis, she soon ripens for some strange bed, and can she say no without risking the wrath of Amalinze's totem? The poor Ezinma of our literature, even as daughters of men, because only men are sons of God, have been the foot rug of heroic incantations, the tit-for-tat bridge-builders whose identities are a careless footnote, and their footsteps stray from the homestead, and while they cry their way back today, it is still a sound of pity, of remorse, tolerated by those who hold the yam in one hand and wield the knife with another. And to read them from Beijing podiums, and dissect their atrocities, the male conservative impulse smacks its lips after a gulp of raffia, clings to the taproot and say, she is the glory of my frenzy? That has been the pattern of our imagination, creative and critical, a right-wing manhood that gleees at its own stymied liturgies, and the left-wing vagrancy of renewed frontiers. This latter, we must admit now, is the yeast of everything we eat and drink and breath in literature and criticism, the pepper in the sauce without which the taste buds remain indifferent to the bland menu, the attentive ear that eavesdrops beyond the gates of Bermuda; and a diplomatic offensive too that opens the spaces for the creative tendril always trembling forth for new meanings, and the critical confluence where meaning is lost and found. In our writing and criticism of it, then, the imbalance of forces has spiced every verbal testimony for affirmative action at world conferences, where, from the lofty podium, the male and female impulses are cast, and take us forward in a disparity of qualitative effort, even as complements of the same, the one describing and described by the other, engendering and engendered, naming and named. Not just

calling to be answered, but calling and called, answering and answered. Right-wing conservatism in *bras de fer* duel with the opposite impulse, enriching the debate.

So does it mean he tolerates the present state of disparity? The insistence was becoming a war cry.

He was tired of answering, why should he when he can only feel what he thought and it made little sense articulating it? He was not even sure of the words that emanated from his lips, so why try to answer in a way that excluded possibilities? But then, what disparities?

Shocked interjections, was he not the one recounting the wrong done to woman?

Of course; yet disparity may not necessarily imply wrong. Is it not possible that disparities are a necessary way forward, the up and down of the highway that tests our manoeuvring ability, and why seek uniformity that can never be? That was a violation of the law, uniformity, for difference itself was the ingredient of life and its beauty. Your equality is a crime of life because it will make the whole scheme a bore, a nightmare. How can you conceive of a world of the rich only and no poor, and all such regulations of a formatted livelihood? That would be terrible, the hell of affluence or whatever, where no difference blurs beauty.

He had cast confusion in the theoretical minds. And they barked at him, taunted his vain demonstrations. Such Freudian minds, he thought, gathering his papers, screaming at anything that suggests a casual alternative.

And what of nation as woman, life itself as a complex relationship?

That was the heart of the matter, yes, to love and believe, and let love and believe. Relationships, he argued, must be differentiated from osmotic forces in personal and inter-personal life as in national and international politics where daily contacts and talk of bread and butter spell survival and dignity. No one wants not to survive, but that must not be when one's dignity is taken away.

So, as a final jab, he must agree to the tyranny of the male writer? This from the lecturer, her glasses perched on the tip of her nose through which she fine-tuned and reclaimed Hester Prynne ever since she returned from America and her nasalized squealing and her spectacles hanging on the thin ridge of her nose earned her

inglorious names, Aunt Polly or Miss Havisham, even Nchanga. But with the graduate students she felt more relaxed and wooed them into her imaginative space with screechy affirmations of Poe and Hawthorne, all based on a Rip Van Winkle motif for the Dream. Whatever the case, she was glad to be back home again, and said so to anyone who was stupid enough to start listening to her endless praise of Denver and his country road sentiments, and was Dr Bambe a capital fool! In the end, she said, home be home, truly, ever home sweet home, and pitied anyone who still had illusions for the United *Stress* of America.

Again, and finally, no, why should he, when he can't decide right from wrong in these matters? All that matters is the story, its direction and undulations that must at each bend submit to a truth without ostentation nor coerced into concessions.

In the end the lecturer intervened and synthesised and elaborated. She teased them about the backbone of every work, for she had read the paperback edition of *Anthills* and believed too in the place of the story.

'Without a story the work itself ceases to be,' Enow said.

'So there can be no novel without a story?' Dr Ngamchuo loved to tickle the students with abstract statements with a question mark delicately placed at the end.

Even as the students offered their opinions, they knew it was one of her open-ended questions whose purpose was to stimulate debate. But 'Tipoung'he frowned, raising his hand, and yes, Dr Ngamchuo said, whaz the ma'er, for she was a keen observer.

'It's the story, doc,' he said; 'I think we all confess a weakness for a good story, and believe every story is good, or is supposed to be so, in its own right, even as a good example of a bad story.' He paused and looked around the semi-circle of seminar, and was about to continue when the lecturer said:

'And if I may ask, what's a good story?'

Tipoung'he had anticipated this not from their lecturer but from the wagging tongues of the sense-pass-king student.

But it was Ngoran who spoke first.

'To my mind,' he said without preamble, recalling a favourite phrase of Prof Ngaadungri's, 'a good story is one that from start to finish is narrated with the lips, even as you read and the words on

the page elevate your spirits. In the end you're the richer for reading because the story rounds up beautifully, with a sense of fulfilment and of relief.'

'I will have to disagree partly with that,' Enow said, 'for we know of very dull stories that tumble from the lips of the teller and are so flat you fall asleep on every page. Besides, and as Dr Bambe has pointed out, a bad story can become a masterpiece in the hands of a wonderful director; but that doesn't alter the state of the story.'

'Zactly!' said Tipoung'he excitedly. 'I think the narrativity alone on which Okonkwo's strength is based is a foreshortened achievement, for after that everything in the story is predictable, exposed at the surface. Nothing, or very little, troubles us within the mood of cultural consciousness that unfolds every time we listen, so to speak, to the omniscient voice.'

'And why should that not be enough,' Ngoran said, 'if that's the writer's purpose?'

'It's enough, I admit,' Tipoung'he said; 'but enough only as far as it stirs and acknowledges the known in us, beyond which we're not troubled. But how do you narrate a story from the soul of man, a story that lips cannot narrate? That's what I'll like us to address. We need to not only to tell the story already so obvious from folk lanes, but also to stress the *how* of telling. We see this already in *Beautiful Ones*, and recently in *Anthills*. And its conclusion doesn't have to be packaged. In fact, the beauty may very well rest on the clumsiness of the ending, the inability to end because perhaps the story like the road of hope should never end.'

'Even as Achebe hails the story as the greatest monument of the Holocaust, with a definite aim?'

Ngoran had hit the nail where he wanted and his eyes blinked with joy.

'Yes,' Tipoung'he said, 'even so. But the notion of the story here has changed from that in the maiden work, with the story now as art and the storyteller as artist, complicating the very narrative that eased our indulgence into complacency. Where Okonkwo told the story, Ikem destroys it in telling, just as Mboisiy destroys Ma Kusham's certainty of sealed lips; and Amaechina becomes the embodiment of and metaphor for the story that must never be concluded as long as the human mind is capable of conjuring



nightmares for posterity. In many respects, I'm fed up with the storyteller who ends the story beautifully and will rather have the artist who resorts to the story only as a stepping stone, even as the art itself baffles him.

Dr Taanwahni had entered the room like a shadow, and followed the debate with a satisfactory grin, glad to note that the boys and girls were maturing into admirable expressiveness. One of the coordinators of the seminars, he believed in the teaching that inspired, let the students burn their fingers at the bellows of knowledge, if only for the inspiration to course through their veins and become a living part of their consciousness. He was the last river to cross, his knees wobbled already, strong as they were, and he could rock the students no more, not as they would have loved him to, before they set foot on the race track of an unknown and unpredictable future. Hope, trust, and confidence, only these he offered them, balm and boost to their glowing minds, the enabling sanctuary for the future harvest. And he bore a Leviathan burden, of hope and of despair also, all one well balanced, beyond good and evil, and beyond Pozzo-knowledge, qua, qua, qua, if only we were a little more than humans. But that too did not matter as long as we could sanctify the surroundings of our human constituencies and keep the dread of vice in check. Eventually, so that the hair should no longer stand on the back of the students' necks, he materialised and they sighed, waiting for the mortar to be squeezed in where their individual bricks stood. He loved talking to them about the writer and the invisible frontier, perceivable on the edge of a wild rose, even when it pricks and the blood drops scatter into a million other frontiers, forever mutating for the good of mankind.

'Never forget,' he said after nodding to Dr Ngamchuo, 'that the writer, whether as storyteller or not, is the supreme image that only changes in shade, the substance forever remains. But it's the burden of the writer to create a world, narrative or suggestive, in which the realistic as well as the virtual are signposts of individual or collective effort and desire, generations past, present, and future, cast against one another in orderly chaos. But since criticism is individual effort, the further burden becomes that of the readers to situate themselves in the text personally and culturally. Those who succeed to find their space and birthmark swear that the writer is in

consonant with human nature, elect themselves his apologists, and then proceed to say things the writer never imagined; while those who are phased out of the contours of the work cry foul and insist the writer is a nihilist against all human endeavour since Creation and there was no denying *that* fact. It's a war that has raged from Plato who inadvertently tried to oil the fangs of tyranny, to Besong who is forging Obasinjom shields against tyrannical monstrosities. But have no fear even as the terrain ahead proves to be very rough everyday; at the meeting point of discourse, if that is conceivable, the truth is always redemptive. The problem is with understanding the ending, for it's easier to bid farewell to a loved one than close a story especially a sad story. And life, as with good art, is always a sad tale; this is even more interestingly so for you with a fractured past and a mosaic face, you the redeemers of complex truth and wrong as bedfellows, forever shivering in the throes of meaning. For we're living in the gutters of a country we would have called ours otherwise, and loved without boundary for our daily bread. The task is yours to decipher as young men of Letters, budding writers and critics, through whose lenses truth and wrong must be rehabilitated, even as politicians are such indecent breakers of the image, tongue-twisters whose only art is to speak with water in their mouths. But have faith, for the coward commits suicide on the eve of his redemption; don't allow individuals to destroy your belief in the good and in the future, in the work of art and criticism of same.'

The shadows had long fallen on the building from the enclosing hills and the students breathed as if afraid of the eternal sunset that had engulfed them from the peaky distance. He urged them to hear something new, always, and go for the untrodden path even in familiar zones, something they had never heard before although they knew all along that it was out there, only waiting to be recognised and drawn into individual lenses, the collective complements, the beckoning horizon. But hearing it may shock them and even frustrate the hope in their hearts, and they may become hostile and then how shall he respond? He thought for a while and concluded aloud that it was not his burden to bear anymore, thank God for that, but the prick against their soles must show them where the road leads and how to reach the summit.

## Chapter Eighteen

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### To Migrate or not to Migrate

But that was not the question anymore; it was rather how, and his heart quailed at giving so much of himself away: a possibility, even though not a fact, is still synonymous to surrender, betrayal. He had vowed to himself never to stoop to conquer and in the terms and conditions of his scholarship, he sensed the manipulative tendency toward a self-effacing servitude, which he abhorred.

Like books and books to be read for industry, but also as good examples of bad books, his own thoughts fighting him in an eternal duel, reeling brains on the tip of a noose, bad-named.

But give me space, O do, at the return of the swallows, Lord. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, the curious insight into cobwebbed enclaves of my earthly existence.

Gethsemane on his trembling lips as he muttered God, and fear in his heart, threatening resolve.

Space in the pulse of reinvented evil, Oh give me, to lay my head and weep on my mental couch, here by the river bank.

Stray thoughts haunting him down by the river of Babylon, and he tethered to the spot. But Gentle River, he said, gently wash my constructed memory away, purify my sight and let me feel my grip of brotherman out of the shadows of constructed death.

Amen.

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‘There’s nothing like the present,’ he said, aware of his unbridled arrogance again showing its head and added philosophically: ‘Only the past and the future.’

She was reclining against the wall, her arms across her chest, a wondering look in her eyes blotting out her beauty. After the many years, and now this bitter-sweet announcement that threatened everything like a plague. In the end she collapsed into meaningless consolations about the present, while it lasts, for that's all there is, and all we've got. And that put him off, the suggestion of his own indecision, when he should stand up like the hero of his heart and say yes or no without a second thought, and not caught in the entangling strands of time.

'The present,' he continued, because she only looked on in a wondering blankness, 'is only a shadow of the past already known and of the future still to be discovered; a blink of time, a faint shimmer that allows us to peep in front and behind, the intangible moment in which nothing is done because it doesn't exist.'

'You're just talking,' she said, already wandering in the wilderness of his words, so hypnotic but also meaningless. They led her nowhere, now that she needed a space for her own thoughts, so she said instead: 'Time will heal all, I know,' even as she did not hear her voice.

'Ah, that!' he said and smiled weakly. The pain was unbearable and he hated pretence that was his own inability.

'Yes, even that!' She would be courageous, no matter what.

'In all its mad relativity?' he said aware again of daring into unknown zones of intellectualism long after he must have travelled, where night and day shared the same hour, he snoring in dreamless hemispheres and she probably wondering still what he was doing?

But she knew, and had lectured him on quantum jargon and relativity, which meant nothing to him beyond the vacant space in his own heart. He was dizzy on the very virtuality of the relative, when he needed palpable reality to hold on to. She had spoken in simplified analogies, but it was still like the present imposing itself, a miraged category of loss and gain, life and death, always the momentum and the resistance, of yes and no, and he struggling to find himself all the time.

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And what next, before or after the banks of the Rubicon? To go abroad as convert, then? His heart stood still in resistance and confusion, the fruit not to be taken, and God was away, probably hunting, and his weak voice of desperation was lost in the rhapsody of gaming. In the turmoil of conversion, if it were possible, only if, he was alone, still and isolate, and criminal to his faith: he heard faint words of accusation, why hesitate, and his blood bubbled, rioting. Every yes, he knew, carried a crucifix, and same with a no, and the tape of silence was almost across his lips like terminal balm.

And what if he were to rush home to inform his old man of his imminent flight, if he must, and to remind him that the root only strays abroad but never forfeits its own? Were these just consolations of the dying day, and of his own end? Or excuse to see and feel the old paths once more, the undulating horizon, the frail hands emaciated by labour and neglect, and the warming bird sounds that forever echo the beginning?

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‘Brimstones of the Nativity,’ he said and she looked up blankly. Whatever he meant, like his gross lamentation ‘on the wings of time,’ was his secret and she did not wish to share in it, fed up with the heavy burden of waiting.

‘Hackneyed disease of coffee and cocoa *njangi*, my despondent plight, when the limping bards, once upon a time nay-sayers to the fraudulent miasma, now usurp Mulafako’s voice, to woo me against natty rebel dispensations.

‘And there’s release in forgetting, the heart no longer mangled by a passion it can ill-possess; a whim nurtured into eternal vines of patriotism or discarded to seek one’s soul where it waits?’

He longed for the everlasting embrace, and for the generosity of the rock dancer or of cigarette smokers, switching without regrets and tossing without envy, but never the traitor nor prostitute, never! His sigh was heavy and could have strangled all breaking and broken hearts from the beginning of time, and she felt the echo, watching him.

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He was lying on his back and reading mirages from the paint-traced ceiling, and again imagining for the umpteenth time the look of shocked disappointment and gratitude which he should see on his father's wrinkled face, the betrayal of his last hope? What if the old man only paused and then continued chewing his roasted after-meal corn, curious and disappointed, but said nothing? For, was the man not tired now and confessed *I don tire* as his refrain of concession to a boisterous bunch of children, some the children of his children, all his pride, but no longer attentive to his whispery orders? So why shred his habitual silence in which he picked the threads of his life, and wondered in his loneliness if he had acted correctly to send all his children to school, with none now to see the evening through with him unlike his age mates? Had the choice not been his from the beginning? Why then was he to cringe every time he saw one of them arriving and wonder just how long they would stay before he again saw their departing back? Hours may be, but hardly over a day?

He thought too about the coming years if he were away, under a different sun, and already he missed the community to which he belonged even as an irregular visitor, but spat on the nation in which he was a mere shadow. But he tried to feel God in his own heart, and hoped therein to situate his definitions and find his meanings, a soft echo that talked to him only, through no one else, and when he listened he felt kin-echoes from hearts that were constrained by too much adherence to belief. He pitied them, that they were so committed to something that excluded their own participation.

The question was, were he to live, what miracle could rescue him from the scion of himself, a devalued specimen, a castaway even from himself, whose existence was nonexistence? He had resolved to live all his *life* against all odds, but now, it was clear to him, he must live by rules that suffocate in order to survive – or not live at all and so resign into the constructed shadows swearing patriotism around him? He considered again the options for survival, and realised that in reality, and beyond the painted picture that portrayed an arena of a happy and united people, he must circumvent himself and gather the pieces of life around him and feed on the crumbs of his after-requiem extravaganza. But he paused, and considered again his role in his impending demise. Stooping to

conquer has many definitions, all of which have never appealed to him and he would not be a signatory to any of them now, in this desolate moment of his miserable life.

He saw another sunset and sustained harmony of the world, beyond him.

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‘There is sunrise in the womb of an egg, vision behind closed lids,’ he said, wrestling with himself to be free from invisible cords that tethered him to a place he despised.

Then the egg cracked like thunder and he awaited the rays that should thaw his mangled muscles, and burn away the knotty cords. Instead, his country emerged from the thin shell, and assumed the ridiculous pose of a man bearing a cross, bending forward. Needle-sharp nose that faced East and hanging buttocks that formed a despicable mountain range for the West wind that raged in thunderous alarm, he saw, and said: ‘Horrible chips of the colonial God.’ But it was the undesirable behind that caught his attention, from which the country’s shit was flushed. And he was still tethered, prisoner to deeds that bespeak his bolting mind, and the trials and challenges of living in the shadow of his own country. And his mind was made up even as he watched.

And in his hour of Gethsemane, and clinging onto his broken self, was he to be an embarrassment to the establishment? But not for the glory of divinity and the eternity of it: only for his soul and the space on which to plant and nurture it. He had pleaded with her to leave him alone that night, but at midnight he unlocked her door and entered. She gasped to see him and moaned half-sleepily, and when he told her, she only stared. So he showed her the note he had written to Dr Bambe: *Thanks sir, for the offer, but even as I feel honoured, it is not every exile who seeks the road.*

**-End-**



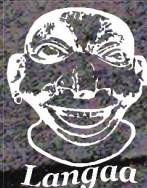






Growing up almost simultaneously with the independent Cameroon nation, it takes Tipoung'he a long time together with challenging experiences to realise that he has all along been living in the shadow of his country. His epic story is representative of the many whose untold stories are caught in the schematic confusion of independence, in which self-knowledge must rally back finally from the lethargic ideals of the Nation and the Patriot in a redeeming instance of identity. The story mirrors the growth of the hero as he gets used to his ever shifting environment. The complexity of experience, the burden of knowledge, and how to express these, confront Tipoung'he with prescriptive arrogance, and the more he gets entangled in the authoritative and patriotic mesh, the more he becomes aware of the need to withdraw from their osmotic consciousness. The moment of withdrawal, which coincides with self-knowledge, is a personal and symbolic rebirth.

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